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**The Thesis Committee for Ryan David Briggs
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**“A Singular Fusion of Taste and Edge”
A24 and the Indie Sector in the 2010s**

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Thomas Schatz, Supervisor

Alisa Perren

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A24 and the Indie Sector in the 2010s**

by

Ryan David Briggs

Thesis

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Abstract

“A Singular Fusion of Taste and Edge” A24 and the Indie Sector in the 2010s

Ryan David Briggs, M.A.

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Supervisor: Thomas Schatz

This thesis uses A24, the independent film and television company, as a case study to examine the American indie sector during the 2010s. Employing discursive analysis of trade and popular press outlets, industrial analysis of Conglomerate Hollywood, textual and genre analyses of individual films, and paratextual analysis of marketing and branding strategies, this study reveals continuities and changes in the indie sector during a decade of record global box office grosses and the continued consolidation of the media industries.

This thesis lays out the state of the multi-tiered indie sector throughout the decade. This includes the mini-conglomerate Lionsgate, conglomerate-owned specialty divisions like Focus Features, and genuine independents like A24. I also argue that by cultivating a unique brand that catered to young Millennials, Generation Z-ers, and cinephiles, A24 became the leading tastemaker in the indie sector over the course of the 2010s. The company accomplished this by refining a house style that encompassed

elevated genre films, prestigious realist dramas, and quirky dark comedies. This house style points to notable differences in indie film culture from the Sundance-Miramax era, when leading indie companies kept genre and prestige films under separate divisions. A24 also released a number of coming-of-age films that targeted young audiences. Finally, the company demonstrated a commitment to auteur filmmaking in order to create long lasting relationships with key talent and simultaneously appeal to cinephile audiences and indie film culture.

Throughout this study I also track the evolving interdependent relationship between streaming platforms and indie cinema throughout the decade. A24's production and licensing deals with companies like Amazon and Apple exemplify the ways in which the indie and streaming sectors have become deeply intertwined during the 2010s. The addition of the streaming giants to Conglomerate Hollywood and the indie sector underscores further fundamental changes to indie film culture from previous eras studied by scholars.

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Introduction

Serious questions about the fate of the American indie sector swirled at the end of the 2000s. With the 2008 financial crisis drying up funding sources for independent filmmakers and the effective shuttering of a number of key indie distributors like Miramax and New Line Cinema by their conglomerate-owned parents, indie film was in freefall. By the time the dust of the indie shakeout settled in 2012, the indie sector was reemerging, albeit with some key differences from its Sundance-Miramax era heyday. Integral to this new landscape was A24, an independent film company founded in 2012 that, by decade's end, established itself as the indie sector's leading tastemaker with a loyal fan base of cinephiles and young audiences. By examining A24, this thesis reveals much about the state of indie cinema as a whole in the 2010s, a decade defined by record global box office figures, an unprecedented number of independent releases, and the further consolidation of Conglomerate Hollywood.

A24 is a useful case study to examine the broader indie sector for a number of reasons, not least of which is its brand, which over the decade became synonymous with "taste and edge," according to film critic Owen Gleiberman.¹ Thanks to this brand identity, the company attained a level of cultural notoriety unmatched by any other firm in the 2010s. The A24 identity relied on a fusion of savvy marketing strategies that exploited the relatively low costs of online advertising, an appeal to niche audience

¹ Owen Gleiberman, "'Uncut Gems': The Starling Indie Smash That Audiences...Don't Like? (Column), *Variety* (Variety Media, 1 January 2020), <https://variety.com/2020/film/news/uncut-gems-adam-sandler-the-safdie-brothers-a24-1203454367/>.

cohorts like young Millennials and cinephiles, and a commitment to auteur-driven filmmaking that cultivated relationships with key creative laborers. A24 was also adept at navigating a changing film culture which saw the spread of indie cinema to new and proliferating sites of exhibition like streaming platforms and Video-on-Demand (VOD). In fact, A24 made important deals with technology companies throughout the 2010s that helped the company thrive while building its growing library. Meanwhile, A24's presence on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram effectively engaged with film fans who participated in film culture online. In all of these ways, A24 was the first in a new breed of digital indie companies that relied heavily on the Internet as a site of marketing, branding, exhibition, and fan engagement.

This thesis represents an early attempt to historicize and analyze A24 as a company along with the larger indie sector during the 2010s. Ultimately, this project is invested in understanding micro-industrial changes that took place within the indie sector during the last decade. There are a number of key conceptual throughlines that unite the chapters within this study. These include: First, the ongoing role of trade and popular press discourses in the cultural legitimization of A24 and how these simultaneously diagnosed the state of the indie sector; second, the evolving relationships between A24 and digital companies/platforms and how this exemplified new interconnections and interdependencies between indie cinema and streaming services; third, the ongoing refinement of A24's unique and recognizable brand and what this process reveals about strategies that successfully cultivated Millennial and cinephile audiences; and fourth, the deployment of A24's brand identity and how it represented a singular corporate

authorship among indie distributors; and fifth, the ways in which A24 used familiar notions of authenticity and creative freedom in marketing its films and how this echoes important indie predecessors and contemporaries. To begin my study, it is productive to first review the multiple ways that both “independent” and “indie” have been conceptualized by scholars in previous work on American independent cinema.

INDEPENDENCE BEFORE THE 2010S

Throughout the 1980s and in the early 1990s independence could simply be described as anything not connected in some way to a major studio, as Justin Wyatt argues.² However, this becomes quite complicated in delineating what “outside Hollywood” means exactly. While A24 was an independently owned company that did not partner with any major studio during the 2010s, it released films that, for the most part, reflected dominant Hollywood aesthetic styles and themes. Further, how does one account for a company like A24 relying on alliances with massive corporations like Amazon and Apple? Here we can consider Chuck Kleinhans’ argument that independent film is best conceptualized as “relational” to dominant Hollywood. This accounts for overlap in style and mode of production between the independent sector and Hollywood.³ This also helps in understanding how to industrially position companies like Miramax and New Line Cinema that were foundational to the independent film boom in the late

² Justin Wyatt, “The Formation of the ‘Major Independent’: Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood,” *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, edited by Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 74-90.

³ Chuck Kleinhans, “Independent Feature: Hopes and Dreams,” *The New American Cinema*, edited by Jon Lewis, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 308-27.

1980s and early 1990s and continued operating in the indie film sector despite being bought by major studios. Additionally, Kleinhans' conceptualization allows for consideration of the major studios' classics divisions and subsidiary indie distributors like Focus Features and Searchlight Pictures which became increasingly important members of the sector in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Geoff King argues that independent cinema is located in a number of positions in between Hollywood and other industrial, aesthetic, and thematic styles such as the *avant-garde*, art cinema, and exploitation films, among others. This allows for independence to be understood in a number of ways and in multiple industrial locations rather than by any endemic, and therefore essentializing, characteristics.⁴ King also argues that independent cinema encroached closer to Hollywood in industrial and aesthetic terms in the late 1990s and 2000s, resulting in what he and other scholars have called "Indiewood."⁵

Yannis Tzioumakis' discursive approach to definitions of independence is particularly relevant to my approach. He argues that independence has been defined by different industrial and popular discourses surrounding filmmaking throughout the medium's history, thus allowing for a historically shifting definition of independence. As Tzioumakis notes, indie cinema is best understood "as a discourse that expands and contracts when socially authorised institutions (filmmakers, industry practitioners, trade publications, academics, film critics and so on) contribute towards its definition at

⁴ Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2005).

⁵ Geoff King, *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

different periods in the history of American cinema.”⁶ This is particularly instructive for my approach to A24, which seeks to locate how the company was positioned by trade and popular coverage. A discursive approach to independence also reveals how A24 was exemplary of shifting notions of indie cinema during the 2010s. Tzioumakis’ discursive approach independence echoes my discursive approach to authorship. Notions of individual and corporate authorship play important roles throughout this study, and I briefly review relevant literature below.

DISCURSIVE AUTHORSHIP

Authorship, as I deploy the term throughout this thesis, is most productively understood as stemming from Michel Foucault’s theorization of the author function. The author function both builds on and contests Roland Barthes’ notion of the death of the author, recognizing that meaning is made through the process of consumption and not endowed benevolently within a text by some creator, while also insisting on the importance of the author in the shaping of meanings and discourses surrounding texts. Foucault writes that “the author function is...characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society.”⁷ The author function stands in for the numerous textual, thematic, political, and social associations connected to an author or some collection of authors. The author function then can stand apart from an individual creative laborer and be mobilized and consumed in many different forms. A

⁶ Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 10.

⁷ Foucault, “What Is an Author?” 107.

corporate example of the author function is a film company like A24. When audiences encountered an A24 film in the 2010s, they were confronted with discourses of indie filmmaking, youth-oriented content, elevated genre filmmaking, and more facets of the company's brand identity discussed throughout this study. These discourses associated with A24 shaped the ways in which a viewer could interpret the text they were consuming, thus providing an author function to every film the company released. Foucault notes that "the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the work; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction."⁸ In other words, the author function is a consumption practice that delimits the boundaries of discourses in which a text or number of texts exists within, thus placing the meanings made by audiences within established and evolving parameters.

Poststructuralists like Barthes and Foucault encourage us to displace the author of a text as the authority of its meaning, which endorses the notion of an active audience with final say over what a text means to them. The author function, then, also encourages us to understand authority as multi-faceted and ongoing, affected every time new audiences encounter a text. Jonathan Gray reconsiders the author function in the contemporary media landscape by asking the question, "*when* is the author?" Gray proposes "a notion of authorial clusters and of a phenomenological model of textuality

⁸ Ibid., 118-119.

that poses creation as always in process, and authors as always present,” and continues by asserting that “in truth no text ever has a singular author.”⁹ By recognizing that meaning creation is ongoing and that authorship is inherently plural, we can account for the many contexts that a text exists within in its lifetime after production and release, and allow ourselves to discuss “multiple nodes of authorship and the sociality of authorship.”¹⁰

Gray’s illumination of the “sociality of authorship” is particularly instructive in understanding A24’s corporate authorship, since it provides a framework with which we can approach the industrial, marketing, and reception processes that exerted authority over films released by the company. The plurality of authorship leads to questions of who exactly is vested with true authority over texts and why, for “not all readers *claim* authority, nor are all readers *given* authority by others....”¹¹ To answer such questions, Gray turns to interpretive communities which function to create normalized or consensus-built meanings from individual texts. Interpretive communities have authors within them that “have greater abilities to establish the meaning of a text and to append meanings to that text” than others within the group.¹² For films released by A24 we can note the author function that the company itself plays, but we must also see indie film culture as the dominant interpretive community engaging with these movies. Thus, indie filmmakers, reviewers for publications like *IndieWire*, awards bodies like the Film Independent Spirit Awards, and other individual members of indie film culture shaped

⁹ Jonathan Gray, “When is the Author?” in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 89.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Gray, “When is the Author?” 101.

¹² Ibid.

dominant meanings made of A24 films for themselves, for other members of the indie film interpretive community, and even for those outside of such an interpretive community that look to it as a source of authority.

Ultimately, authorship of A24 films was shaped by multiple forces, many of which I explore in throughout this study. The filmmaking process is an inherently collaborative one, in which a number of individual and corporate agents exert influence and authority over how a film is produced. A study of the production of individual films may reveal who acted as authors of them, but this thesis is more invested in revealing who *counted* as authors in marketing and critical discourse and *how* their authorship is understood. By interrogating the many ways in which authorship was constructed, practiced, and deployed in the films and marketing strategies of A24 in the 2010s, I reveal how the indie sector's leading tastemaker utilized authorship to increase the cultural and economic value of its products, along with its own brand. Derek Johnson and Jonathan Gray remind us that authorship is not simply "a question of art and individual expression, but also of social and institutional structures that govern cultural production, enabling, compelling, and authorizing some forms while constraining others."¹³ A24's power as a brand and as a film company has been largely built upon mobilizing familiar auteurist tropes in the marketing of its films and by operating as an author of its own. Therefore, individual, plural, and corporate authorship are important sites of investigation to analyze the independent company.

¹³ Derek Johnson and Jonathan Gray, "Introduction: The Problem of Media Authorship," in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 6.

STUDYING THE INDIE SECTOR IN THE 2010S

Throughout this thesis I use “indie sector” to describe US-based film releases that were not produced and/or distributed by the six major Hollywood film studios in the 2010s. This encapsulates genuine independent companies like A24, which had no industrial ties to the conglomerated majors, but also the mini-conglomerate Lionsgate, which operated similarly to the major studios, and the conglomerate-owned specialty divisions such as Sony Pictures Classics, Searchlight, and Focus Features. I settle on “indie” rather than “independent” to acknowledge that the sector this thesis is primarily concerned with had, for some time, been inextricably linked to mainstream Hollywood filmmaking in industrial and stylistic terms. This had been true since at least the moment Miramax was acquired by the Walt Disney Company in 1993. And as the Indiewood trend took hold of the sector, the most recognizable and financially successful indie distributors were the conglomerates’ specialty divisions.¹⁴ Additionally, I do not use “specialty” to describe the entire sector because the vast majority of pictures distributed by the conglomerate-owned subsidiaries and genuine independents relied heavily on discourses of independent filmmaking that situated such films as alternative in narrative and aesthetic practice—along with political and cultural ideology—to major studio fare whether or not this alterity is in fact applicable to most films coming from the sector.

¹⁴ King, *Indiewood, USA*.

By including A24, a genuine independent, in a broader indie sector that included Lionsgate and the conglomerates' subsidiaries, I point to an evolving industrial landscape within Conglomerate Hollywood, existing below the six major studios (Disney, Warner Bros., Universal, Paramount, Sony, and Twentieth Century Fox), that took shape throughout the 2010s. This thesis' focus on A24 as a leading independent company necessitates the reappraisal of strict distinctions between genuine independents and the conglomerate-owned indie divisions. A24 represented the first time since 2008's financial collapse that a truly independent company was able to emerge and thrive among the conglomerates' specialty studios. But A24's growth was measured, remaining a boutique outfit that meaningfully challenged major independents and mini-majors for market share as well as for critical cachet over the course of the decade. A24's success proved that there was room in the indie sector for genuinely independent firms if they could strategically capitalize on proliferating platforms for digital marketing and exhibition, respond to a changing indie film culture, and capture niche audience cohorts.

Key to A24's ability to continually grow its operations was the company's emphasis on building and maintaining a brand identity unique among the indie sector. A24 effectively captured a niche audience segment of young Millennial and Generation Z indie film fans through its house style—a blend of elevated genre fare, quirky dark comedies, and arthouse-skewing prestige films. While other companies in the indie sector released films that could fit into A24's house style, no other distributor was able to do so with as much consistency throughout the 2010s. And because A24's founders understood from inception that branding would be paramount in succeeding as an independent, the

company cultivated a loyal audience of young viewers and indie cinephiles since its very first releases.

In order to illustrate how A24 achieved such a unique position within the indie sector, I rely heavily on analysis of trade and popular press discourses surrounding A24 specifically, and on independent film more broadly. As mentioned above, Tzioumakis' discursive approach is instructive,¹⁵ but Alisa Perren's use of trade and popular press coverage of Miramax in *Indie, Inc.* is a direct model for this thesis. As she explains, "Miramax was central to discussions about authenticity, autonomy, and creative freedom" throughout the 1990s.¹⁶ These ongoing debates aided in defining "independence" during an earlier era, I do the same with A24 in this study. Tracing how the company has been covered from its inception through the end of the 2010s in trade outlets like *Variety* and *IndieWire* is essential in illuminating how journalists and critics positioned A24 in relation to other independent distributors. Simultaneously, I look to popular press outlets like the *New York Times* and *GQ* that functioned to introduce casual film audiences to A24 by foregrounding the company's brand identity. Because popular press outlets largely accepted A24's corporate mythology and constructed identity, this coverage acts as a space in which the company's cool and edgy image was reinforced to audiences. A24's strategic exploitation of popular press coverage is, therefore, an important site of analysis throughout this thesis.

¹⁵ Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*.

¹⁶ Alisa Perren, *Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012), 7.

This discursive approach is complemented by industrial analysis of A24 specifically and the indie sector more broadly. By looking at A24's production and licensing pacts with companies like DirecTV, Amazon, and Apple, I reveal fundamental changes that indie film culture underwent throughout the 2010s. Each chapter also features textual analysis of individual films which reveals A24's evolving house style and how the company effectively targeted key audience cohorts like teens, young adults, and cinephiles. Attention to film style and, especially, genre also illuminates how 2010s indie film did and did not reflect previously dominant aesthetic trends associated with indie cinema revealed by scholars like King and Michael Z. Newman in their studies of independent, indie, and Indiewood cinema.¹⁷ Finally, I conduct paratextual analyses of marketing and branding campaigns associated with individual films and A24 itself. Because the company relied on a brand identity representative of youth, edge, and coolness, turning to trailers, film posters, events, and other paratextual materials sheds light on strategies A24 took to construct and maintain its corporate persona.

The methodologies used throughout this thesis situate my study of A24 within media industry studies, an evolving field of scholarship that Perren notes “blends political economy’s critical approach to the production and distribution of culture with cultural studies’ concern with the power struggles that occur over the value of and meaning within specific texts.”¹⁸ Media industry studies is primarily concerned with approaching the converging media industries with an interdisciplinary methodology that combines

¹⁷ King, *American Independent Cinema*; King, *Indiewood, USA*; and Michael Z. Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Perren, *Indie, Inc.*, 5.

previously separate approaches to the study of media such as the Frankfurt School's "mass culture" theorizations, traditional economists' "top-down" perspectives of industrial and organizational structures," and film and television scholars' focus on textual, generic, and authorial analyses, among others.¹⁹ By blending a top-down approach to the indie sector that acknowledges the power of the corporation—in this case A24—and other institutions within the global cultural industries and, simultaneously, focusing on texts, authorship, and creative laborers, I provide a necessary examination of indie film culture throughout the 2010s, a site that has yet to be meaningfully interrogated by scholars.

I use a media industry studies framework to track macro-industrial trends within Conglomerate Hollywood along with micro-industrial developments within the indie sector as well as the effects each has had on the other. My approach also acknowledges how proliferating digital platforms of exhibition interacted with the indie sector throughout the decade. Additionally, this historiographic and industrial approach to A24 in the 2010s creates the opportunity to analyze the ways indie film culture itself evolved throughout the decade as it responded to the expansion of the streaming sector, the collapse of the DVD market, and the continued growth of online social networking sites that provided spaces for indie film enthusiasts to engage with each other. The response by indie film culture to these industrial and technological developments contributed to a changing definition of "indie film" in the 2010s, one that differed from its discursive

¹⁹ For an overview of the historical background and epistemological roots of media industry studies see Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, "Introduction: Does the World Really Need One More Field of Study?" in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009), 1-16.

meanings in the Sundance-Miramax and Indiewood eras. Due to the dearth of existing scholarship on indie cinema in the 2010s, this study of A24 represents an early and necessary effort at identifying the configuration of a new indie sector while demarcating the boundaries of an evolving indie film culture

CHAPTER OUTLINES

This thesis is organized chronologically, following three major periods of A24's development in the 2010s. Chapter 1 begins with a necessary schematizing of the indie landscape at the beginning of the decade, as the sector was bouncing back from the devastating 2008 financial collapse. This represents an early attempt at explicating the multi-tiered industrial structure of indie cinema which is essential to understanding the niche A24's founders aimed to fit their new company into. I then cover the first two-and-a-half years of the distributor's existence, August 2012 up to the beginning of 2015, with special focus on *Spring Breakers* (2013), A24's first significant box office success and a film that acted as a foundation for the company's early brand identity. I also discuss how A24's founders (Daniel Katz, David Fenkel, John Hodges) followed their instincts to indie auteurs like Sally Potter and Sofia Coppola to movies like *Ginger and Rosa* and *The Bling Ring* (both 2013) that effectively targeted young Millennial audiences, a cohort that remained the company's key demographic throughout the decade. Chapter 1 ends with a discussion of how streaming and VOD platforms enabled important changes to indie film culture, shifts that continued to evolve throughout the 2010s.

Chapter 2, focuses on the year-long period between the 2016 and 2017 Academy Awards ceremonies in which A24 films received their first Oscar nominations and wins, the company released *The Witch* and *Moonlight* (both 2016) to great critical and commercial success, and which culminated in the latter film taking home the Oscar for Best Picture. During this period A24 achieved a level of industrial and cultural legitimization that made the company an important player in the indie sector. The chapter begins with a discussion of A24's developing house style which, by the end of 2016, encompassed elevated genre films, quirky dark comedies, and arthouse-skewing prestige films. *The Witch* was a surprise box office success, bringing A24 its best domestic gross up to that point (over \$25 million).²⁰ I also use the film as a case study to explore how the company utilized so-called elevated horror films as a key component of its brand identity. Chapter 2 then turns to a discussion of *Moonlight*, A24's first foray into production financing and the film that overtook *The Witch* as the company's highest-grossing release. By expanding its operations beyond acquisition and distribution into production, A24 took on increased financial risk while gaining greater control over its brand identity. *Moonlight* also brought a new level of prestige to the distributor as it was a unanimous critical favorite and important awards contender. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the role of the Academy Awards as a cultural and industrial legitimator and how its choice of *Moonlight* for Best Picture in 2017 represented one of the ways in which the Academy has responded to appeals for reform.

²⁰ "The Witch," *Box Office Mojo* (IMDb.com), <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r1947684865/>.

Chapter 3 looks at the final three years of the decade and is primarily concerned with authorship of A24 films. I use case studies of *Lady Bird* (2017), *Eighth Grade* (2018), and *The Souvenir* (2019) to consider the ways in which individual authorship was constructed within critical and popular press discourses and understood by audiences. I then turn to a discussion of Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019) to interrogate the ways that genre and intertextuality functioned as authors of these texts, shaping audiences' meaning-making processes. All of these case studies also reveal how invested A24 was in branding itself as a home for creative freedom. Appearing as a bastion of auteur filmmaking was an imperative for the company in an effort to draw marketable filmmakers away from the conglomerate-owned specialty studios which had been associated with a number of commercially successful auteurs like Wes Anderson, Darren Aronofsky, and Alexander Payne in the 2000s and 2010s. Finally, I highlight A24's summer 2019 Public Access events, which consisted of a series of outdoor live screenings of six A24 films that were projected onto billboards. The Public Access events exemplify one of the ways in which A24 constructed and deployed its brand identity outside of film and television production and distribution and reinforced its unique standing among cinephiles and young audiences. I argue that A24's strong and recognizable brand identity illuminated how the company's corporate authorship functioned over each of its films, locating A24 releases within discourses of indie cinema, youth-appealing coolness, prestige, and more.

Finally, I conclude this thesis with a look toward the 2020s. A24 ended 2019 with its highest market share ever (0.95%), with its largest box office success so far (*Uncut*

Gems [2019]), and having released the most films it ever had in one year (18). The company was poised to continue this upward trend into the new decade, but, like every other film company in the world, was stymied by COVID-19. And while A24 remained active throughout the pandemic, releasing five films on-demand and in theaters and announcing a number of financing and production deals, the company faced all of the same questions and uncertainties that plagued the entire global film industry at the start of the new decade.

Chapter 1: A Millennial Independent
A24 Builds a Brand with *Spring Breakers*
(August 2012-December 2014)

“I could tell that they were on some new shit, you know?”

--Harmony Korine, writer and director of *Spring Breakers*²¹

According to its founders, A24’s origin story began with Daniel Katz in Italy, surrounded by friends, thinking about the company he’d been longing to start. It was spring 2012 and Katz, then head of film financing at Guggenheim Partners, a global financial services firm, saw a hole in the independent sector and imagined he and a couple friends could fill it.²² Katz’ first partner was David Fenkel, who co-founded the independent distributor Oscilloscope Laboratories in 2008.²³ The second onboard was John Hodges, who began his career at USA Films (eventually Focus Features) and was now at Big Beach, an independent production company. Katz had hesitated to strike out on his own, to step away from the well capitalized Guggenheim Partners, up to that point. But as he drove into Rome he had a “moment of clarity,” realizing the time was right for

²¹ Zach Baron, “How A24 is Disrupting Hollywood,” *GQ* (Conde Nast 9 May 2017), <https://www.gq.com/story/a24-studio-oral-history>.

²² Nicholas Carlson, “Ex-Yahoo Interim CEO Ross Levinsohn Is Now CEO Of Guggenheim Digital Media,” *Business Insider* (Insider, Inc. 15 January 2013), <https://www.businessinsider.com/ex-yahoo-interim-ceo-ross-levinsohn-is-now-ceo-of-guggenheim-digital-media-2013-1>.

²³ Dave McNary, “Katz, Fenkel, Hodges launch A24,” *Variety* (Variety Media, LLC 20 August 2012), <https://variety.com/2012/film/news/katz-fenkel-hodges-launch-a24-1118058061/>.

something new in the indie world--something that he, Fenkel, and Hodges would build themselves.²⁴ A company that could recapture the best from the 1990's indie boom. This epiphany all happened while Katz was on Italy's Autostrada A24. And so a company was born.

As the three A24 founders told it, they saw an opportunity in the independent sector as it recovered from the devastating end of the 2000s when a number of specialty divisions such as Paramount Vantage, Miramax, and Warner Independent were shuttered or sold off and financing had severely dried up thanks in large part to 2008's financial crisis. Katz, Fenkel, and Hodges rarely spoke to the press in the 2010s, and when they did they kept their rhetoric within the artistic realm, never revealing much in the way of industrial considerations. Katz for example, said: "Films didn't seem as exciting to us as when we started our careers.... And that signaled an opportunity."²⁵ Whether or not films were as exciting as in the 1990s is up for debate, but what is not was the widespread excitement within the indie sector at the state of its bounceback by summer 2012. A24 was officially announced on 17 August 2012 with an office in New York City and sights set on the upcoming Toronto International Film Festival market.²⁶ Within a year, A24 had created a distinctive brand identity which targeted young Millennials and cinephiles with savvy online marketing campaigns and a commitment to auteur filmmaking. It also

²⁴ Baron, "How A24 is Disrupting Hollywood," <https://www.gq.com/story/a24-studio-oral-history>.

²⁵ Adam Doster, "Upstart Distributor A24 Is Making Indie Films Exciting Again," *Fast Company* ((Fast Company, Inc. 11 January 2016), <https://www.fastcompany.com/3054918/upstart-distributor-a24-is-making-indie-films-exciting-again>.

²⁶ Dave McNary, "Oscilloscope's Fenkel Starts A24 Films," *Variety* (Variety Media, LLC 17 August 2012), <https://variety.com/2012/film/news/oscilloscope-s-fenkel-starts-a24-films-1118058021/>.

struck two major deals with Amazon and DirecTV which helped to further capitalize the company along with its initial startup cash provided by Guggenheim Partners.²⁷

This chapter maps out the state of the independent sector in the early years of A24's history in order to reveal the niche the company stepped into. The importance of *Spring Breakers* (2013) in the genesis of A24 cannot be overstated, and thus a large portion of this chapter involves a textual and paratextual analysis of the film and its marketing campaign. While it was a modest financial success, the impact of *Spring Breakers*' style, marketing, and release strategies are integral in understanding how A24 entered the public imagination. I also discuss A24's other 2013 releases, *A Brief Glimpse Inside the Mind of Charles Swan III*, *Ginger and Rosa*, *Spring Breakers*, and *The Spectacular Now*, in order to highlight the company's attempts to appeal to young and cinephile audience cohorts. Finally, I delve into the ways in which A24 utilized evolving digital platforms and technologies in its earliest years to reveal how streaming and Video-on-Demand (VOD) have become inextricable parts of indie cinema's industrial and cultural landscape throughout the 2010s.

THE STATE OF THE INDIE SECTOR

By August 2012 the indie sector comprised a wide range of producers and distributors, from mini-conglomerate Lionsgate, to the mini-majors Summit (acquired by Lionsgate in January 2012) and The Weinstein Company, to conglomerate specialty

²⁷ Brooks Barnes, "The Little Movie Studio that Could," *The New York Times* (The New York Times Co. 3 March 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/03/business/media/a24-studio.html>.

divisions like Sony Pictures Classics, Fox Searchlight, and Focus Features. There were also several small, genuinely independent outfits in operation at the time producing and/or releasing just a handful of films or less each year. This broad swath of companies employed a wide spectrum of capitalization and corporate strategy.

I detail the industrial and stylistic characteristics of the indie sector's top companies in order to reveal the space A24 filled. A key to the company's success was its executives' deftness at identifying niches A24 could target, rather than pushing into more crowded areas of the marketplace already dominated by companies like Lionsgate, The Weinstein Company, and the conglomerate-owned specialty divisions. By identifying the industrial and brand strategies employed by sector leaders, the negative space left in the indie sector at the start of the 2010s—which A24 began to occupy—becomes more clear.

At the beginning of the decade, Lionsgate was unique in the independent sector, “a vertically integrated multimedia operation with a library of approximately 12,000 titles,” according to Alisa Perren.²⁸ This occurred through a decade of rapid growth as a result of numerous acquisitions, joint ventures with major studios, and expansion into the global television marketplace.²⁹ Lionsgate's industrial maneuvering throughout the 2000s revealed the corporation's internalization of the strategies employed by the Big Six media conglomerates since the mid-1980s, as Hollywood and other media industries structurally converged. Jennifer Holt uses “structural convergence” to describe the “mixture of

²⁸ Alisa Perren, “Last Indie Standing: The special case of Lions Gate in the new millennium,” *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond* ed. Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 117.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

vertical and horizontal integration *and* conglomeration” that has taken place within the media industries over the past four decades.³⁰ To be clear, Lionsgate was not a member of the Big Six. However, it is important to note Lionsgate’s ability to rise to the top of the independent sector was driven by the implementation of the Conglomerate Hollywood ethos. Lionsgate followed a blueprint for a twenty-first century mini-conglomerate that A24’s Katz, Fenkel, and Hodges knew they could not replicate as they launched their company, even if they wanted to.

Besides understanding the corporate structure of Lionsgate, it is important to also understand the types of films the mini-conglomerate relied upon to sustain its growth. In 2013, the company took in \$2 billion at the worldwide box office for its second year in a row. This was largely driven by *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (2013), the second in a franchise based on a popular young adult series of novels, and Summit’s *Now You See Me* (2013), a surprise hit heist thriller starring indie/Hollywood mainstays Jesse Eisenberg, Mark Ruffalo, and Woody Harrelson.³¹ These blockbusters, intended for mass appeal, complemented Lionsgate’s commitment to “popular commercial genre fare targeted to clearly defined and often underserved demographic groups such as young adults, African Americans, Latinos and aging boomers.”³² While the company also

³⁰ Jennifer Holt, “Introduction: The Foundation of Empires,” *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hjgd1.4>.

³¹ Anita Busch, “‘Catching Fire,’ ‘Now You See Me’ Drive Lionsgate To Become Billion Dollar Baby 2nd Year Running; Company Box Office Take To Date: \$2.25 Billion Worldwide,” *Deadline* (Penske Business Media, LLC 23 December 2013), <https://deadline.com/2013/12/catching-fire-now-you-see-me-drives-lionsgate-to-become-billion-dollar-baby-here-and-abroad-company-box-office-take-to-date-2-2-5-billion-worldwide-655993/>.

³² Perren, “Last Indie Standing,” 109.

released “quality” auteur-driven films such as *Precious* (2009) and *Mud* (2013) more traditionally associated with indie filmmaking, its primary goal was to compete with the majors by mimicking their strategies to be a big tent studio. In other words, Lionsgate did not rely on a public image stressing discourses of indie quality in the way that Miramax had because such an identity would have appealed to too narrow an audience segment.

From the perspective of its founders, A24, in contrast, needed to establish a strong, clear brand identity with an identifiable audience immediately in order to survive. Commercial independent films like *The Hunger Games*, *Now You See Me*, or Relativity’s *Immortals* (2011) were out of the question for the modestly financed A24. So Katz, Fenkel, and Hodges instead focused on acquiring quality auteur-helmed indie films reminiscent of the romanticized Sundance-Miramax era. Such films, which include *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989), *The Piano* (1993), and *Boogie Nights* (1997), were successful in part because of the narrative, aesthetic, and ideological distinction between them and major studio fare like *Batman* (1989), *Jurassic Park* (1993), and *Titanic* (1997).

It is important to keep in mind, however, that commercial films have always been a part of the independent landscape. New Line Cinema’s early-1990s *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* franchise was hugely successful and was a clear example of how that company largely steered clear of discourses of quality traditionally associated with indie cinema, happy instead to focus on mass audience appeal with commercial releases. But due to financial constraints and its founders’ mythologizing, A24 distinguished itself from commercial-oriented firms like Lionsgate or Relativity by blending traditional notions of “quality” indie filmmaking with arthouse-skewing edgy genre releases. This

blend of indie sensibilities is reminiscent of pre-Disney era Miramax films like *sex, lies, and videotape*; *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1990); and *The Grifters* (1990).

Harvey and Bob Weinstein built Miramax in the 1990s in large part by relying on a string of what Perren calls quality indie blockbusters. She explains “quality” in the discourses of indie cinema functions as “an ideological term deployed by marketers to suggest sophisticated material geared toward a more educated and discriminating audience.”³³ Miramax’s reception in industry and popular discourses, particularly in the early 1990s, was based on an association by audiences of the distributor with non-mainstream films that, through clever marketing techniques, had crossover potential to audience members outside the indie film culture. Michael Z. Newman identifies this “indie” film culture as “generally urban, affluent, well-educated, and fairly narrow by comparison with the audience for studio pictures.”³⁴ Importantly, Newman argues that indie audience members seek to use their tastes as markers of distinction from a perceived mainstream, constructed by themselves, in order to “generate their [own] cultural or subcultural capital.”³⁵ This historical idea of the assumed indie audience is clearly a primary demographic A24 was targeting early on; although by the beginning of the 2010s industrial and cultural changes had broadened the audience for indie films beyond the narrow subculture that initially defined independent filmmaking.

³³ Alisa Perren, *Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 17.

³⁴ Michael Z. Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 5.

Perren's description of the shift in dominant indie discourses from a prizing of "the cinema of quality" (largely associated with the mid-to-late 1980s independents) to "the cinema of cool" (throughout the 1990s) is instructive in understanding A24's ideal audience.³⁶ By 1995, "'indie' had transformed into a convenient catchphrase--a term that could be used to refer to an industrial and aesthetic transformation difficult to assess yet very much in progress."³⁷ In fact, as the 2000s proceeded, "indie" became a broad signifier, deployed by the press, film critics, and in marketing campaigns as a genre, an industrial position, a budgetary and filmmaking practice, and more. This decline in specificity of "indie" coincided with key changes in the aesthetic style of indie films, just as the specialty divisions of the conglomerated majors—e.g., Disney-era Miramax, Fox Searchlight, and Focus Features—began to dominate the sector in the 2000s.

As noted in the introduction, Geoff King uses the term "Indiewood" to label the shift by the conglomerates to incorporate indie filmmaking into their activities during the late 1990s and 2000s. King defines this term as "a part of the American film spectrum in which distinctions between Hollywood and the independent sector [appear] to have become blurred. It suggests a kind of cinema that draws in elements of each, combining some qualities associated with the independent sector, although perhaps understood as softened or watered-down, with other qualities and industrial practices more characteristic of the output of the major studios."³⁸ King locates the heart of Indiewood

³⁶ Perren, *Indie, Inc.*, 94-101.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁸ Geoff King, *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 3.

within conglomerate-owned indie or specialty divisions like Miramax, Focus Features, and Searchlight, which released films like *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (2002), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2003), and *Sideways* (2004) during this period. I argue that The Weinstein Company (TWC), despite being a stand-alone mini-major, was also a place where Indiewood flourished. The company is best understood as firmly *inside* the Hollywood mainstream due to, among other reasons, the unique and privileged position that the Weinsteins had held within the industry for about fifteen years. This position, built upon a decade-plus of financial and—importantl—critical and awards success (53 Oscars for Miramax films since being acquired by Disney in 1993), meant investors were eager to finance TWC after the Weinsteins left Disney.³⁹ The company was well capitalized immediately, largely by investors at the financial services company Goldman Sachs.⁴⁰ This sort of funding separated TWC from most other genuine independents, and certainly any newly emerging ones like A24.

Also important in laying out the landscape of the independent sector is understanding the centrality of Harvey and Bob Weinstein to the discursive construction of “indie.” Miramax, along with New Line, dominated the sector’s market share throughout the 1990s. And central to Miramax’s brand identity was its ability to appear to represent the antithesis of Hollywood’s big-budget event films which dominated the majors’ output. This brand identity imbued the company’s successful films with an aura

³⁹ Eugene Hernandez, “Weinstein’s Leaving Miramax, Will Form New Company; Brothers Taking Dimension Label, Leaving All Film Libraries at Disney,” *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 30 March 2005), <https://www.indiewire.com/2005/03/weinsteins-leaving-miramax-will-form-new-company-brothers-taking-dimension-label-leaving-all-fil-78326/>.

⁴⁰ David Segal, “Weinsteins Struggle to Regain Their Touch,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times Co. 15 August 2009), <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/16/business/media/16wein.html>.

of uniqueness, a sense that without the Weinsteins' singular vision, these films wouldn't have gone over as well. For example, Perren notes that the surprise box office success of *The Crying Game* (1992) led to "the press shower[ing] the Weinsteins with renewed praise for their impeccable skill in acquiring and marketing films."⁴¹ Over the course of the 1990s, and especially after the infusion of cash concomitant with the Disney acquisition in 1993, Miramax's association with indie blockbusters like *sex, lies, & videotape*, *The Crying Game*, and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) led to the Weinsteins' tastes more strongly influencing which kinds of indie films garnered attention at festivals, markets, and in awards conversations. Thus, as Indiewood took hold concurrent with a wave of openings of new specialty divisions in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Paramount Vantage in 1998, Focus Features in 2002, Warner Independent Pictures in 2003), Miramax and the Weinsteins were the leaders in defining indie tastes. This is the legacy that the Weinsteins carried with them to TWC when it launched in 2005.

The commercial independent films released by Lionsgate and Relativity and the Indiewood films made and acquired by TWC and the conglomerate-based specialty divisions such as Focus Features often reached budgetary and marketing expenditures that were simply unattainable for a brand new independent company to match. Katz, Fenkel, and Hodges had a clear understanding that A24 would not be able to immediately compete with those larger outfits. The A24 founders also must have understood that what money could do for financing and marketing, it could not for the cultivation of "coolness"—an inherently slippery idea that defies clear definition. However, coolness,

⁴¹ Perren, *Indie Inc.*, 69.

along with quality, has been a central tenet in the discursive construction and maintenance of independent cinema since the mid-1980s. Newman identifies the portion of the independent sector that is associated with coolness as “indie hipster cinema” and states that “hipster movies appeal to a distinct audience that positions its taste in relation to mainstream Hollywood cinema. Its distinctiveness is likewise often realized in the realm of tone or sensibility, which cannot be reduced to style, since it is only in a given context that tone is intelligible and meaningful to audiences.”⁴² These qualities shift with each new generation, and I briefly track them below.

The cinema of cool that Perren identifies with Miramax and the shifting narrative and aesthetic characteristics away from the cinema of quality in the early 1990s is largely associated with Generation X and two of its defining qualities: namely, cynicism and disillusionment.⁴³ These characteristics were best exemplified in films like *Pulp Fiction* and *Swingers* (1996). But conceptions of indie coolness shifted in the early-to-mid-aughts to reflect affluent, white older Millennials’ fetishization of quirk and irony. The films of Wes Anderson were most often identified with this sort of quirky cool, but *Juno* (2007) and *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) are other clear examples. Newman identifies a fundamental theme in indie hipsterism: “the questioning and challenging of adulthood and the sentimentalizing of childhood, realized as the hipster’s refusal to grow up and articulated as a performance of juvenile identity.”⁴⁴ This prolonged adolescence was

⁴² Michael Z. Newman, “Movies for Hipsters,” *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond* ed. Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 71-72.

⁴³ Perren, *Indie, Inc.*, 96.

⁴⁴ Newman, “Movies for Hipsters,” 76.

exacerbated by the 2008 financial meltdown and ensuing economic recession, a generational predicament reflected in many of the films of the mumblecore movement. The characters in mumblecore films like *Hannah Takes the Stairs* (2007) and *Nights and Weekends* (2008) were more often than not white, college-educated Millennials navigating an aimless young adulthood—a cohort particularly impacted by 2008's recession. Mumblecore's low-fi micro-budget aesthetic, long-standing association with the South by Southwest Film Festival, and its embrace of VOD distribution channels helped the movement's key filmmakers to remain working despite the economic downturn.

Two key examples of mumblecore are *Tiny Furniture* (2010), which centers on a recent college graduate seeking identity and direction from her upper-class childhood home, and *Drinking Buddies* (2012), which focuses on a self-destructive young woman stuck between friendship and romance with her coworker. These films highlight the sense of inertia present in many mumblecore films, a feeling that resonated with a generation of indie film audiences dealing with coming of age in the middle of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Mumblecore never commanded widespread attention in the way that other strains of cool indie cinema did, but it reflected shifting realities important to a new generation. And while A24 never released a mumblecore film, the cycle's prominence in indie film culture showed the company the possibilities of targeting generational cohorts. While mumblecore films resonated strongly with older Millennials (those born in the 1980s, who were young adults at the time of the Great Recession), A24 focused its branding and marketing efforts on younger Millennials

(those born between 1990 and 1996) and, eventually, Generation Z-ers (born after 1996), groups not yet reached in any significant way by any other independent. A24 first accomplished this with films like *Spring Breakers* and *The Bling Ring*, as well as by establishing their unique presence on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram, and through their online merchandise shop.

By the 2010s, the dominant trade discourse about the indie sector was one of crisis due to the closure of indie divisions and low box office numbers, due in no small part to the Recession. King notes that this sort of negative diagnosis has almost always been a part of indie film culture and that, in fact, it is essential to the construction of independence at any given time, suggesting that “to be truly indie...is not to be too stable and secure but to exist in a manner that is understood as being ‘on the edge,’ as it were, on a tightrope without a safety net.”⁴⁵ However, by August 2012, the prognosis was looking better. *IndieWire*’s mid-year report was upbeat, noting the sector was “spiraling upward” for a second year in a row. The top five grossing specialty films of the year up to that point had grossed \$83.2 million, up from \$68.1 million the year before and a meager \$26.5 million in 2009.⁴⁶ Industry insiders were upbeat as well, many noting the growing importance of the larger “commercial independent films” offered up by distributors like Lionsgate, Summit, and Relativity. CAA Film Finance Group co-head

⁴⁵ Geoff King, “Thriving or in a Permanent State of Crisis?: Discourses on the State of Indie Cinema,” *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond* ed. Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge 2013), 45.

⁴⁶ Peter Knegt, “Which Indie Films are Winning (and Losing) in 2012? Indiewire’s Mid-Year Box Office Report,” *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 5 July 2012), <https://www.indiewire.com/2012/07/which-indie-films-are-winning-and-losing-in-2012-indiewires-mid-year-box-office-report-242078/>.

Micah Green told *Variety*: “A few years ago, independent films were skewed much more toward arthouse films, which had limited theatrical potential. Part of what is driving the boom in commercial independent films is the increased availability of talent. Beyond that is the increased availability of distribution for commercial independent films. In addition, there is a maturing class of financiers who have the ambition and the means to finance and release these films.”⁴⁷

Along with these more commercially oriented indie films, there was growing industry excitement over VOD settling in as a legitimate exhibition platform for distributors. New distribution outlets and revenue streams meant that there was room for more companies to finance and pick up a wider range of films, with *IndieWire* reporting in early 2013 that “buyers have begun gravitating toward only those films that work best for their specific model rather than everyone scrabbling over a handful of top-tier pictures that look smartest on paper.”⁴⁸ This suggests a sector growing in scope and becoming harder to define. It still had room for a mini-conglomerate like Lionsgate, which sought to emulate the majors’ diversified release schedules, Indiewood mini-majors like The Weinstein Company, as well as subsidiaries like Focus Features. These varied entities collectively spent significant amounts of money financing and acquiring indie films meant to crossover to mainstream audiences. In addition, there continued to be genuine

⁴⁷ Dave McNary, “Buyers Set Stage for Toronto Heat Wave,” *Variety* (Variety Media, LLC. 5 September 2012), <https://variety.com/2012/film/markets-festivals/buyers-set-stage-for-toronto-heat-wave-1118058763/>.

⁴⁸ Jay A. Fernandez, “Sundance 2013: Why the Aggressive Indie-Film Market Reflects Real Promise for the Future,” *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 24 January 2013), <https://www.indiewire.com/2013/01/sundance-2013-why-the-aggressive-indie-film-market-reflects-real-promise-for-the-future-41734/>.

independents like FilmDistrict which were largely focused on commercial films, along with smaller independents without identifiable brands like Samuel Goldwyn Films and Oscilloscope Laboratories, each of which distributed a handful of movies a year, largely acquired at festivals. In sum, the indie landscape was bouncing back from near disaster thanks to new technologies, new financing opportunities, and recognition of emerging niche markets. This is the state of the sector when A24 emerged. And the company immediately set its sights on the 2012 Toronto International Film Festival, with hopes to make a big splash at one of the most important industry networking events and film markets in the world.

IN SEARCH OF CONTENT UP NORTH AND ELSEWHERE

Some two weeks after Katz, Fenkel, and Hodges announced their new company, A24 acquired its first film.⁴⁹ *A Glimpse Inside the Mind of Charles Swan III* was written, directed, and produced by Roman Coppola and featured Charlie Sheen, Bill Murray, and Jason Schwartzman. The film, a raunchy and surreal male mid-life crisis comedy, represented an outlier among A24's other 2013 releases. Along with the company's acquisition attempts in Toronto, this film reveals how the company sought to construct its early brand identity. Sheen had spent much of the previous two years in the news for a very public dismissal from the popular sitcom *Two and a Half Men* (2003-15) after making derogatory comments about the show's creator and executive producer Chuck

⁴⁹ Dave McNary, "A24 Gets a Glimpse of 'Charles Swan,'" *Variety* (Variety Media, LLC. 30 August 2012), <https://variety.com/2012/film/news/a24-gets-a-glimpse-of-charles-swan-1118058468/>.

Lorre and its production company, Warner Bros. Television.⁵⁰ After the firing, Sheen remained in the public eye with a number of videos and interviews in which he made hyperbolic self-aggrandizing comments—the most famous of which became memes and social media jokes referring to Sheen having “tiger’s blood” and his penchant for “winning.” All of this led to a Comedy Central Roast of the actor in 2011 that captured 6.4 million viewers and elicited 450,000 mentions on social media, making it a bonafide cultural event.⁵¹ The notorious Charlie Sheen Meltdown, as it came to be known, made the actor well-known by younger audiences, a target for A24 off the bat. Besides name recognition, however, *Charles Swan III* offered a redemption arc for Sheen in both its narrative and the film’s paratexts—certainly not an unprecedented situation within independent filmmaking. Many actors have seen indie films as a way to rehabilitate or reshape their star texts, allowing audiences to see them in a new light, as artists returning to the roots of their crafts.

Charles Swan III also had deep connections to the indie world that enticed A24, which was eager to signal to audiences what kinds of films the company would be interested in releasing. Coppola had worked on a number of his father Francis’ and sister Sofia’s films, had a long-standing writing relationship with indie auteur Wes Anderson, and had premiered his first feature, *CQ*, at Cannes in 2001. Bill Murray and Jason

⁵⁰ Ed Pilkington, “Two and a Half Men axed after rant leaves Sheen looking a proper Charlie,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media Limited 25 February 2011), <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/feb/25/two-and-a-half-men-sheen-charlie>.

⁵¹ Robert Seidman, “Comedy Central Roast of Charlie Sheen Averages 6.4 Million Viewers,” *TV By the Numbers* (TV By the Numbers 20 September 2011), <https://web.archive.org/web/20110924014534/http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2011/09/20/comedy-central-roast-of-charlie-sheen-averages-6-4-million-viewers/104354/>.

Schwartzman had both been indie mainstays since *Rushmore* (1998), Anderson's second feature and a classic to many fans of indie cinema. *Charles Swan III* did not premiere until early 2013, but in acquiring US distribution rights executives at A24 hoped they could make a small splash among die-hard indie fans and, perhaps, also entice an audience of Sheen-curious viewers.

A week after A24 picked up *Charles Swan III*, executives set out to Toronto in hopes of making a bold statement by acquiring two films in particular, Noah Baumbach's *Frances Ha* (2013) and Derek Cianfrance's *The Place Beyond the Pines* (2013). They failed to pick up either, however, which Noah Sacco, A24's head of acquisitions, described as a "heartbreak."⁵² Getting either film would have provided a major boost to A24's public profile considering both Baumbach and Cianfrance were considered important indie auteurs. *Frances Ha*, in particular, would have balanced out *Charles Swan III* nicely with a young woman at the film's center. Greta Gerwig played the titular role, co-wrote the script with Baumbach, and was considered the mumblecore queen up to that point. *Frances Ha* was also understated, charming, and clearly harkened back to the French New Wave with its wandering and aimless lead filmed beautifully in black-and-white—a stark aesthetic and tonal contrast to the colorful and ultra-ironic immaturity depicted in *Charles Swan III*. Also important, was the obvious awards prospects for *The Place Beyond the Pines*, an intimate, multi-generational triptych crime drama about fathers and sons featuring Ryan Gosling and Bradley Cooper, both enjoying significant career momentum. In some key formal and thematic ways, *The Place Beyond the Pines*

⁵² Baron, "How A24 Is Disrupting Hollywood," <https://www.gq.com/story/a24-studio-oral-history>.

anticipates *Moonlight* (2016), the film that would bring A24 its highest profile awards success. And awards clearly were on the minds of executives at the company, as they acquired Sally Potter's *Ginger and Rosa* two weeks after TIFF with the stated intention of launching an awards campaign for the film's young star, Elle Fanning.⁵³ Ultimately, A24 left Toronto in 2012 somewhat disappointed but in pursuit of a film that the company could build its brand on.

SPRING BREAK FOREVER

"When I started, we didn't have Spring Breakers yet, but the whole focus of that very first meeting I went to was like, 'How do we get Spring Breakers? How do we get Spring Breakers?'"

--Nicolette Aizenberg, A24's Head of Publicity⁵⁴

Spring Breakers screened at 2012's Toronto International Film Festival and had been buzzing through the industry since its world premiere at Venice just a few days before. Megan Ellison's Annapurna Pictures acquired domestic rights during Venice, but the company had no distribution arm and thus was searching for a partner. *Spring Breakers* made for an attractive prospect for A24 for a number of reasons. Similar to *Frances Ha*, *The Place Beyond the Pines*, and *Ginger and Rosa*, the film was helmed by an indie auteur, Harmony Korine. However, Korine commanded a very different public

⁵³ Mike Fleming Jr., "Toronto: Upstart A24 Acquires Sally Potter-Directed 'Ginger & Rosa,'" *Deadline* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 25 September 2012), <https://deadline.com/2012/09/toronto-upstart-a24-acquires-sally-potter-directed-ginger-rosa-343047/>.

⁵⁴ Baron, "How A24 Is Disrupting Hollywood," <https://www.gq.com/story/a24-studio-oral-history>.

profile than Baumbach, Cianfrance, or Potter. Korine had become famous for writing 1995's *Kids* and was soon labeled an *enfant terrible* for the formal experimentation and shocking narratives in his directorial follow-ups *Gummo* (1997) and *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999)—all three films featuring antisocial adolescents at their center. Korine's films had never made very much money and were firmly rooted in the arthouse, but *Spring Breakers* looked in every way like a more commercial prospect. The film starred Selena Gomez and Vanessa Hudgens, two young actresses with massive teen and young adult followings due to their work on Disney Channel shows and films. The movie also featured James Franco playing Alien, a white rapper affecting a heightened version of the style and mannerisms of Black hip-hop artists. And the score was co-composed by Skrillex, a superstar in the electronic music world at the time.

Spring Breakers had a more straightforward narrative than any of Korine's prior work—it was a crime film about four college students (Faith, Candy, Brit, and Cotty) desperate to go on spring break in St. Petersburg, Florida. The trip changes their lives when they are arrested at a party and subsequently bailed out of jail by Franco's Alien. *Spring Breakers* relied on stylized violence to communicate a postmodern gangster narrative that replaces the genre's typical dark urban milieu with sun-soaked beaches and neon-bathed nightlife. The film subverted the classical gangster genre by centering young white middle-class women obsessed with living out gangster fantasies. And while Alien represented a twenty-first century version of the upward socioeconomic striving male fundamental to the gangster narrative, the film does not end with his death, but rather goes on to depict Candy and Brit's vengeful murder of Alien's rival, Big Arch, and their

return to a mundane campus lifestyle. *Spring Breakers*' auteur director, star power, and marketable genre conventions made it an undeniably compelling target for A24.

Noah Sacco was tasked with securing the domestic distribution rights for *Spring Breakers*. A24 executives decided to appeal to Ellison directly while she was on location in Pittsburgh. They hired glassblowers to create gun-shaped bongs and an engraver to carve "Spring Breakers" into them. Interns got the bong made and included it in a gift basket with an assortment of munchies, all meant as a way to show Ellison that "This is why you should go with us. We're passionate. We get movies." As A24 executives tell it, Sacco hand delivered the gift basket to Ellison and the rest was history.⁵⁵ This glass-gun bong story was repeated often by A24 staff, perpetuating an image of the young company as made up of a renegade crew willing to take risks for films they believed in. A24's handling of *Spring Breakers*' distribution was officially announced on 15 November 2012, with the company's press release calling the film "one of the most anticipated movies of the social media generation."⁵⁶ A24 planned immediately to release the film during spring break the next year and to try to appeal to the generation mentioned in their press release by focusing *Spring Breakers*' marketing strategy online.

A24 gave exclusive rights to MTV to feature the first *Spring Breakers* trailer on its website, a fitting partner due to the cable channel's annual coverage of spring break starting in 1986. MTV's spring break events broadcasted live from beaches in Florida and

⁵⁵ Baron, "How A24 Is Disrupting Hollywood," <https://www.gq.com/story/a24-studio-oral-history>.

⁵⁶ Mike Fleming Jr., "Harmony Korine's 'Spring Breakers' Gets Spring Release from A24 and Annapurna," *Deadline* (Penske Business Media, Inc. 15 November 2012), <https://deadline.com/2012/11/harmony-korines-spring-breakers-gets-spring-release-from-a24-and-annapurna-372278/>.

eventually elsewhere for eight hours-a-day, featuring college students descending into wild behavior while wearing bathing suits and drinking enormous amounts of alcohol.⁵⁷ The trailer dropped in January on the first day of the 2013 Sundance Film Festival, and MTV's site crashed due to the enormous amount of traffic.⁵⁸ The trailer effectively captures the moments of frenetic energy and violence that drove *Spring Breakers*' narrative and features a "spring break" mantra repeated over and over by Candy and Alien. Simultaneously, the Skrillex song "Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites" plays over most of the trailer, eliding the long pauses of contemplative quiet within the film itself, crucial sequences that ground the film's otherwise debauchorous energy. This tonal dichotomy is central to *Spring Breakers*' effectiveness. Korine and cinematographer Benoît Debie soak the film with DayGlo-inspired fluorescents, black-lights, and neons to punctuate the bacchanalia associated with MTV Spring Break images locked in its target audience's visual lexicon.

Korine shot the film in St. Petersburg during spring break to capture the realities of the ritual, as his characters and background performers take part in the alcohol- and drug-fueled hypersexualized partying. While this debauchery makes up the film's first minutes, *Spring Breakers* quickly shifts to an examination of the fetishization of violence present in the popular culture that young Millennials and Generation Z-ers consume. Korine's film points out that central to this milieu is the adoption and perversion of a

⁵⁷ Kevin Allen, "MTV to Broadcast Spring Break Coverage Live," *The South Florida Sun-Sentinel* (Tribune Publishing 14 March 1986), <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/fl-xpm-1986-03-14-8601160380-story.html>.

⁵⁸ Baron, "How A24 Is Disrupting Hollywood," <https://www.gq.com/story/a24-studio-oral-history>.

segment of Black culture by middle-class white adolescents and young adults. For example, the film's inciting incident involves Candy and Brit holding up a Chicken Shack while Cotty circles in the get-away car, a Chevrolet El Camino. Candy and Cotty both tell Brit to "Pretend like you're in a video game," to pump her up for the crime. The clear inspiration is the Grand Theft Auto series, which often has the game player inhabiting an avatar who is a person of color committing crimes in urban areas. Importantly, the El Camino is the inspiration for the fictional Cheval Picador, a car featured heavily in two of the Grand Theft Auto games. The game, and Candy and Cotty, endorse a reductive depiction that associates Black and other non-white urban masculinities with hyper-violence. Korine doubles down on this critique later in the film when Candy, Brit, and Cotty describe the robbery to Faith, with each of the women affecting Blackness by altering their normal voices and speech patterns with African American Vernacular English in their recounting.

An important detail that underscores all of this is Nicki Minaj's "Moment 4 Life," which plays in the El Camino as Cotty circles the Chicken Shack, waiting for Brit and Candy to return with the stolen money. Minaj is a Black artist who often adopts white hyper-femininity in her dress and hair styling, an ongoing performance by the artist that comments on the implicit societal privileging of white femininity over Black femininity. Korine's use of the song suggests his characters see Minaj's stylistic fluidity as inspirational, however, they are unable to acknowledge that their whiteness and class status afforded them freedoms in cultural mobility that are not extended to people of color. The spring breakers' ability to easily adopt and discard this gangster performance

is highlighted at the end of the film as well. *Spring Breakers*' climax sees Candy, Brit, and Alien execute a plan to murder Big Arch and his crew for shooting and injuring Cotty. Alien is killed at the beginning of the climactic sequence, but Candy and Brit go on to murder Big Arch and all of the other Black men in his mansion. The women escape from the scene and drive away from St. Petersburg and their crimes toward their college campus, having promised their mothers to be the best versions of themselves from now on. This sequence underlines the ways in which young white people operationalize cultural appropriation in the service of their own antisocial behavior. *Spring Breakers* uses the debauchorous spring break ritual to illustrate the cultural tourism that white middle-class youth perform in consuming and enacting Blackness, leaving a trail of Black men's bodies in their wake.

The racial preoccupations in *Spring Breakers* were largely left out of A24's marketing campaign, beyond what viewers could glean from glimpses at Alien in trailers and photographs. Instead, the distributor focused on reaching young people by largely avoiding television spots and utilizing social media, specifically by maintaining an active presence on Facebook and Twitter, where the official pages for the film employed an ironic and playful tone. In the weeks before the trailer dropped, the *Spring Breakers*' Facebook page was dominated almost exclusively by photos of the four main actresses wearing bikinis accompanied by cheeky captions like "suck it," "For all the haters," and "Up 2 no good." These posts frontload the sexuality of the four young women and their in-your-face tone was a clear provocation to viewers most familiar with Gomez', Hudgens', and Ashley Benson's work in family-friendly films and television series. Such



A24 shared this image of the *Spring Breakers* cast and writer-director Harmony Korine (far right) on the film's official Facebook page on 28 March 2013, a week into its nationwide release and a day before Good Friday with the following caption: "on Friday, be good. we're saving you a seat." A24. [2013]. From *Contently*. <https://contently.com/2013/09/30/the-mystery-genius-behind-a24s-hilarious-content-reveals-how-to-break-all-the-rules-nd-get-away-with-it/>.

images pushed audiences to reassess the actresses. A24 doubled down on this promotional strategy after the trailer's premier and in the two weeks before the film's theatrical release. The majority of social posts featured elements highlighting the crime aspects of *Spring Breakers*. These included images of a number of weapons, especially guns, and loads of cash and also more images of Alien and Big Arch, played by hip-hop artist Gucci Mane.⁵⁹ Between the trailer and these later social media posts, interest was growing. Importantly, this buzz came not from blitzing Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram with promoted posts, but instead from organic user-to-user sharing, which accounted for half of the 174 million Facebook impressions the film made in the weeks leading up to its

⁵⁹All of the above details come from posts between December 2012 and March 2013: "Spring Breakers," Facebook, accessed 4 November 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/SpringBreakers>.

premiere.⁶⁰ With this social media strategy, A24 was creating immense and effective social media engagement with young audiences for an arthouse film without spending large amounts of money.

A24 released the film during actual spring break for obvious reasons, opening it in three theaters in New York and Los Angeles on 15 March in the hopes of building audience buzz for its nationwide release a week later. The plan proved successful. The film earned \$263,002 in its limited opening weekend for a per-screen average of \$87,667, the highest per-theater average of any film in 2013 up to that point and one of the top twenty-five per-theater averages ever for a live-action film.⁶¹ The trades speculated that the high gross would lead to big numbers the following weekend, when A24 would release the film in over 1,100 theaters nationwide. *Variety* suggested that the young company may have misread the pre-release buzz and should have gone wide right off the bat.⁶² *IndieWire* predicted the film could gross \$10 million by the end of its second weekend.⁶³ Although this speculation proved to overestimate the film's box office power, it was invaluable for the brand new A24 since the company, after just three releases, was

⁶⁰ David Ehrlich, "The Distributor as Auteur," *Slate* (The Slate Group, LLC 30 September 2015), <https://slate.com/culture/2015/09/profile-of-the-independent-film-distributor-a24-the-company-behind-spring-breakers-and-room.html>.

⁶¹ Peter Knegt, "Specialty Box Office: 'Spring Breakers' Hits \$5 Million; 'Loot' Starts Strong," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 24 March 2013), <https://www.indiewire.com/2013/03/specialty-box-office-spring-breakers-hits-5-million-loot-starts-strong-39988/>.

⁶² Andrew Stewart, "Should 'Spring Breakers' Have Gone Wide This Weekend?," *Variety* (Variety Media, LLC. 17 March 2013), <https://variety.com/2013/film/box-office/should-spring-breakers-have-gone-wide-this-weekend-1200324966/>.

⁶³ Peter Knegt, "'Spring Breakers' Expands To 1,104 Screens This Weekend: How High Can It Go?," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC 21 March 2013), <https://www.indiewire.com/2013/03/spring-breakers-expands-to-1104-screens-this-weekend-how-high-can-it-go-40018/>.

drawing significant trade press attention--much of it highlighting the online marketing campaign pushing *Spring Breakers* to its big opening weekend.

Ultimately, *Spring Breakers* went on to gross over \$14 million domestically.⁶⁴ But more important than the box office numbers were the film's cultural and industrial impacts. *Spring Breakers* was suddenly A24's calling card with the press, mentioned every time the distributor came up in the trades. This also meant that *Spring Breakers*' style and surprise success framed the releases of A24's two 2013 summer films, Sofia Coppola's *The Bling Ring* and James Ponsoldt's *The Spectacular Now*. Industry commentators noted that they were waiting to see if the "upstart" company could repeat its success.⁶⁵ Neither film made the kind of money *Spring Breakers* did, but Coppola's name came with built-in indie cred, and *The Spectacular Now* received the best reviews of A24's first five releases. The *Spring Breakers* hype didn't end with its theatrical release; the film had its digital premiere on iTunes on 9 July, where it debuted at number one. It is likely that many of the teenagers unable to see the film in theaters because of its R rating jumped at the opportunity to rent or buy the film and watch it online. Whatever the reasoning, the film's digital launch sparked a second round of online buzz, with

⁶⁴ "Spring Breakers," *Box Office Mojo*, accessed 4 November 2020, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl108234241/?ref=bo_tt_gr_1.

⁶⁵ Peter Knegt, "Specialty Box Office: Sofia Coppola's 'Ring' Scores Solid Bling in Limited Debut," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC 16 June 2013), <https://www.indiewire.com/2013/06/specialty-box-office-sofia-coppolas-ring-scores-serious-bling-in-solid-limited-debut-37573/>; and Todd Cunningham, "Independent Box Office: 'The Spectacular Now' Average \$50K Per-Screen in Debut," *The Wrap* (Penske Business Media, LLC 4 August 2013), <https://www.thewrap.com/independent-box-office-spectacular-now-averages-50k-screen-debut-108271/>.

Spring Breakers trending on Twitter all over again.⁶⁶ Considering the decline of the home video market in the face of a growing number of digital platforms available for accessing film and television content, the iTunes news was another boon for A24. For the company to continue operating, it needed to make money from deals with digital platforms like iTunes, Netflix, and Amazon Prime Video to carry its small library and establish its brand identity. A24's youth-targeting 2013 slate helped make the company an attractive potential partner to these sites.

Notably, all of A24's five 2013 releases except *Charles Swan III* focused on high school or college-aged characters. Sally Potter's *Ginger and Rosa* is a coming-of-age drama set in 1960s England, with Elle Fanning portraying Ginger, the film's central character. Ginger channels her frustration and pain over her home life into a political awakening, brought on by the anti-nuclear weapons movement. As her personal life crashes in on her, Ginger begins to understand that adulthood guarantees no greater stability than adolescence and that forgiveness is the key to her finding some semblance of peace. *Ginger and Rosa* offers a depiction of adolescence, family, and female friendship that is complex, tender, and, at times, difficult. Potter does not talk down to her audience, instead providing nuanced and layered characters in which individuals, especially young women, can see themselves represented in all of their contradictions. Likewise, James Ponsoldt's *The Spectacular Now* depicts teenagers reckoning with each other, traumatic relationships with their parents, and their evolving identities with little-

⁶⁶ Paula Bernstein, "'Spring Breakers' Hits #1 In iTunes Store, Topping 'Despicable Me'; Harmony Korine Tells Us The Two Make an 'Awesome Double Bill,'" *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC 10 July 2013), <https://www.indiewire.com/2013/07/spring-breakers-hits-1-in-itunes-store-topping-despicable-me-harmony-korine-tells-us-the-two-make-an-awesome-double-bill-37007/>.

to-no guidance. Ponsoldt, like Potter, foregrounds the messiness of parent-child relationships, even if *The Spectacular Now* is wrapped up more neatly than *Ginger and Rosa*. Both films invite teenage and young adult audience members to recognize themselves on screen through compassionate portrayals of adolescence.

Spring Breakers and *The Bling Ring* offer less realistic and more stylized depictions of young people, but ones that still effectively target that audience segment. Like *Spring Breakers*, *The Bling Ring* tells the story of young people committing crimes. The film is based on the true story of a group of Calabasas teens burglarizing the houses of a handful of celebrities they idolize, which writer-director Sofia Coppola saw as a critique of how social media, celebrity culture, and reality television affect the lives of young people.⁶⁷ Coppola and cinematographers Harris Savides and Christopher Blauvelt bathe the film in Southern California sunlight, highlighting the mundane daily realities of the upper-middle class youths that make up the Bling Ring. In contrast to the bright exteriors, interiors of the celebrities' houses that the gang robs are softly lit and stuffed with designer goods, mimicking the glossy pages of fashion magazines. This visual juxtaposition highlights the celebrity and consumer culture that drive the burglary spree. Similarly to *Spring Breakers*, *The Bling Ring* showcases the joy of committing crime, but the latter film offers a more shallow and oft-repeated critique of Millennial consumer culture and the American media's obsession with celebrity.

⁶⁷ HeyUGuys, "Sofia Coppola - The Bling Ring Exclusive Interview," 4 July 2013, video, 4:51, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKmBRgmFLQ0>.

Ginger and Rosa, *Spring Breakers*, *The Bling Ring*, and *The Spectacular Now*, all released in the spring and summer of 2013, all effectively appealed to young Millennials with themes that addressed them directly, rather than targeting adult audiences with sentimentality or nostalgia. Also worth noting is the centrality that young women play to all of these narratives. In all four films, women exhibit a great amount of agency and have complex lives outside of their relationships to men. By releasing films that appealed to young women as much as to young men, A24 effectively targeted a demographic often overlooked by mainstream Hollywood action blockbusters, which remained heavily male-centric throughout the 2010s. The strategy also reflects important changes in the assumed indie film audience which, throughout most of the 1990s and 2000s, was largely male. With these four films, A24 began cultivating an audience of young viewers with stylish and serious auteur-helmed fare. This audience segment quickly became the foundation of A24's brand and an integral selling point when it came to securing more capital.

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

In the first week of September 2013, A24 executives returned to Toronto to begin building a slate of films for the upcoming year. They picked up North American rights to the thriller *Locke* (2014) for \$1.25 million and rights for the science-fiction horror mashup *Under the Skin* (2014) for just over \$1 million.⁶⁸ But the biggest news regarding

⁶⁸ "TIFF Deals: A24 Goes 'Under the Skin,' Blanchett in Mamet's 'Blackbird,' CBS Films Takes Radcliffe's 'The F Word,' Lange Replaces Close in 'Therese,' and More," *IndieWire* (Penske Business

A24 from TIFF this time around was a partnership they forged with DirecTV. The satellite operator pledged \$40 million to co-acquire films with A24. Such titles would receive an exclusive thirty day VOD release through DirecTV before beginning a theatrical run. The two companies' first pickup under the pact was Denis Villeneuve's *Enemy*, which they set for an early 2014 release.⁶⁹ The deal offered A24 two major incentives: First, by splitting the cost of acquisitions with DirecTV, A24 would spend less money to acquire more films, increasing the size of its library. It quickly became clear that A24 would use the partnership to acquire films with low box office and awards potential. Consequently, the company would add to its growing library, an eventual source of revenue, while also lowering its financial risk on the front end in terms of acquisition and marketing costs. Also, because A24 would devote minimal marketing resources to these releases, the company's brand identity would not suffer from poor box office performance or critical reception. In other words, A24 could focus the majority of its resources toward maintaining the slick brand identity it created with *Spring Breakers* and *The Bling Ring*, while stockpiling a number of titles with DirecTV, regardless of how they fit into the house style. Secondly, by partnering with a company with an annual

Media, LLC. 10 September 2013), <https://www.indiewire.com/2013/09/tiff-deals-a24-goes-under-the-skin-blanchett-in-mamets-blackbird-cbs-films-takes-radcliffes-the-f-word-lange-replaces-close-in-these-and-more-196139/>.

⁶⁹ Paula Bernstein, "DirecTV Goes Indie with new A24 Deal: Satellite Operator Will Co-Finance and Market Independent Films," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC 30 September 2013), <https://www.indiewire.com/2013/09/directv-goes-indie-with-new-a24-deal-satellite-operator-will-co-finance-and-market-independent-films-34405/>.

revenue of nearly \$30 billion in 2012, A24 became stronger at the negotiating table.⁷⁰ David Fenkel made this point to *The Wall Street Journal*, suggesting that DirecTV's size, revenue stream, and strong desire to be in the film business would prove a selling point when working out acquisitions deals with other companies: "What we're seeing here is a powerful partner who's not just incentivized to maximize transactions, but to invest in the movie's long-term value."⁷¹

The A24-DirecTV deal offered "a sign of the increasing importance of VOD for indie titles" as a key new ancillary market, according to *IndieWire*'s Paula Bernstein. Home video sales helped stabilize the indie film sector throughout the 1990s and DVD sales exploded in the early 2000s, but these sales had plateaued by 2006 and began a swift downturn the next year.⁷² Greater access to broadband internet for audiences and improvements in bandwidth brought on new opportunities for film exhibition through streaming technologies even as physical home video sales continued to plunge. In *Indie Cinema Online*, Sarah E.S. Sinwell discusses VOD's effects on the independent sector and indie film culture throughout the 2010s, primarily through an examination of the growing importance of day-and-date releasing. Sinwell suggests that day-and-date distribution strategies—meaning the simultaneous theatrical, DVD, and streaming/on-demand release of a film—decrease the power of exhibitors and "create new

⁷⁰ "DIRECTV Announces Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2013 Results," *Business Wire* (Business Wire, Inc. 20 February 2014), <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20140220005396/en/DIRECTV-Announces-Fourth-Quarter-and-Full-Year-2013-Results>.

⁷¹ Bernstein, "DirecTV Goes Indie," <https://www.indiewire.com/2013/09/directv-goes-indie-with-new-a24-deal-satellite-operator-will-co-finance-and-market-independent-films-34405/>.

⁷² Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction*, second edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 280.

opportunities for audiences to access independent films outside of a theatrical context by making it possible for them to access indie films online.” This is most important, she argues, for audiences left out of the arthouse theater circuit due to their geographical location.⁷³ The growing importance of VOD to independent exhibition, along with the increased viability of streaming platforms like Amazon Prime Video, broadened the perceived audience for indie films, thus destabilizing the sector along with long-standing assumptions that it appealed mainly to urban and white middle-class viewers.

Only about two months after the DirecTV deal, came the announcement in November 2013 that A24 made an agreement with Amazon for exclusive streaming rights to most of its films after their DVD and Blu-Ray release. Brad Beale, Amazon’s director of digital video content acquisition, mentioned *Spring Breakers* and *The Bling Ring* in the press release marking the deal, noting the two films’ popularity with Amazon customers purchasing physical copies through the site.⁷⁴ As discussed earlier, these two films, along with *Ginger and Rosa* and *The Spectacular Now*, cultivated a young audience for A24—one that enticed Amazon. *The Hollywood Reporter* framed the deal as the “latest salvo in an ongoing battle between Netflix and Amazon to attract and retain subscribers by inking exclusive deals with content providers.”⁷⁵ Like the DirecTV deal, the Amazon multi-year pact accomplished much for A24. First, the streaming rights

⁷³ Sarah E.S. Sinwell, *Indie Cinema Online* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 46.

⁷⁴ Paula Bernstein, “5 Daily Tech Stories That Filmmakers (and Film Fans) Must Read: Amazon Gets ‘Spring Breakers,’ Crowdfunding Ebert Doc and More,” *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC, 21 November 2013), <https://www.indiewire.com/2013/11/5-daily-tech-stories-that-filmmakers-and-film-fans-must-read-amazon-gets-spring-breakers-crowdfunding-ebert-doc-and-more-32732/>.

⁷⁵ Hillary Lewis, “Amazon Prime, A24 Announce Exclusive Multi-Year Streaming Deal,” *The Hollywood Reporter* (The Hollywood Reporter 21 November 2013), <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/amazon-prime-a24-announce-multi-658584>.

provided another source of revenue for the company to expand its operations. Second, the shelf life of and exposure to A24's films suddenly increased, with a permanent home easily accessible to a growing audience of Amazon subscribers (estimated at 10 million in the US at the time of the announcement).⁷⁶ Third, A24 added an element to its brand identity by embracing new technologies and convergence culture, thus further helping it become a "cool" company that recognized shifting sites of viewership and capitalized on the data that Amazon offered. A24's Matthew Bires called the Amazon pact "the next generation in output deals" and noted that it offered A24 "better analytics to monitor the films' reach."⁷⁷ Amazon had access to its Prime members' locations and consumption habits, giving A24 access to information about viewers that it could use to shape its audience targeting strategies moving forward.

The collaboration of independent filmmaking with massive tech companies like Amazon persisted as a part of A24's business model throughout the 2010s, further blurring industrial lines—once necessary markers of distinction for independent film culture. As Sinwell noted about VOD, the availability of independent cinema on streaming platforms like Amazon Prime, Netflix, and Hulu encourages us "to consider the multiple ways in which cinema circulates in culture, not only within the cinema itself but also on our computers, tablets, and cell phones."⁷⁸ On one level, A24 partnered with DirecTV and Amazon Prime out of necessity, compelled to increase its cash flow; but on

⁷⁶ Lucas Shaw, "Amazon Makes Its First Exclusive Movie Deal -- And It's With A24," *The Wrap* (The Wrap News Inc. 21 November 2013), <https://www.thewrap.com/amazon-makes-first-exclusive-movie-deal-a24/>.

⁷⁷ Lewis, "Amazon Prime, A24 Announce Exclusive Multi-Year Streaming Deal," <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/amazon-prime-a24-announce-multi-658584>.

⁷⁸ Sinwell, *Indie Cinema Online*, 17.

another level, these partnerships signaled a changing indie film culture, one that was increasingly diffuse across regional, racial, and class boundaries and, thus, increasingly difficult to define. As Newman suggests, “indie cinema is the product of indie film culture’s collective judgment about what counts—or does not—as indie.”⁷⁹ Therefore, with the exhibition sites of indie cinema spreading to laptops and mobile devices—along with the festivals, arthouse theaters, and DVDs with which it had been more traditionally associated with—the boundaries around indie film were becoming wider, demarcating a culture much less exclusive than in earlier iterations.

Strategies of maintaining the indie film taste culture were also changing significantly due to the ongoing diffusion of streaming platforms. Because Amazon, Netflix, and Hulu used algorithms to suggest content to users, a new, data-driven aspect of indie film culture entered the picture. This was a model driven, at least in part, by the corporate objectives of just such streaming powerhouses, all of which were producers and distributors of their own content by the early 2010s. Whereas arthouse theater programmers, independent video stores, and film societies once had key roles in shaping indie film taste and culture through their screenings and collections, these institutions had their voices largely silenced by industrial, economic, and cultural factors, not least of which included the rise of streaming platforms. And while corporate desires have always influenced notions of value and taste within the indie film sector and within broader Hollywood, the largest streaming platforms in the 2010s wielded immense power in assigning value and categorizing taste through their stranglehold on content and

⁷⁹ Newman, *Indie*, 5.

algorithmic sorting capabilities. In these ways VOD and streaming sites fundamentally altered independent film distribution and audience viewing practices, challenging us to reconceptualize what had been seen as defining characteristics of indie film culture. Meanwhile, emerging companies like A24 had to consider the role of streaming platforms as institutions of tastemaking as well as sites of exhibition. By partnering with Amazon in 2013, A24 indicated that it recognized the growing importance of streaming to broader film culture while using the deal to increase its capitalization and exploit Amazon's cache of data.

CONCLUSION

A24 spent late 2013 mobilizing an award-season campaign for James Franco's *Spring Breakers* performance, using the phrase "Consider This Sh*t." Despite the cheeky appeal, the campaign was a serious one and it ended up helping Franco net a handful of prizes, including Best Supporting Actor from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association and the National Society of Film Critics. Awards would become an increasingly important part of A24's strategy to establish itself as a major independent player, a topic I take up at length in the next chapter. With *Spring Breakers* and just four other 2013 releases, A24 drew significant attention to itself in its first full year of operation. The year 2014 saw the company double its output with eleven releases including two horror films (*Under the Skin* and *Tusk*), a genre that would become increasingly important to its brand identity. It also released the prestige gangster drama, *A Most Violent Year*.



A24 launched a "Consider This Sh*t" awards campaign behind James Franco's *Spring Breakers* performance. A24. [2013]. From *The Hollywood Reporter*. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/race/james-franco-oscar-campaign-asks-617753>.

A24's first steps into the industry and its early successes reveal much about the state of the independent sector at the beginning of the 2010s, the strategies necessary to survive as a genuine independent amidst the continued consolidation of the industry, how the company began to create a strong brand synonymous with youth and coolness, and how new technologies and emerging platforms of exhibition were altering indie film culture. Yannis Tzioumakis has suggested that "American independent cinema [in the 2010s] as a whole has, by and large, become a much more fluid, less stable and less institutionalised category of filmmaking than in the heyday of indie and indiewood

cinema in the 1990s and 2000s.”⁸⁰ This destabilization is exemplified by A24 from 2012 to 2014. The company’s founders, all indie film veterans, knew that A24 had to be a recognizable brand if it was going to survive amongst the majors, mini-conglomerates, mini-majors, conglomerated specialty divisions, and other genuine independents that made up Conglomerate Hollywood. Merely flying under the radar was not an option.

Despite A24’s early successes, it doesn’t appear as though Katz, Fenkel, Hodges, or anyone else at the new firm had a precise idea what the company’s brand would be. Instead they followed their instincts in acquiring films helmed by indie auteurs. Sally Potter’s *Ginger and Rosa*, Harmony Korine’s *Spring Breakers*, Sofia Coppola’s *The Bling Ring*, and James Ponsoldt’s *The Spectacular Now* contributed to a brand that targeted young audiences seeking complex representations of themselves. At the same time, the auteur directors brought cinephiles along, solidifying indie cred for A24. With *Spring Breakers*, key indie sector commentators were suddenly paying attention to the new firm on the block, impressed by its online marketing campaign that led to the film’s surprising box office success. And by the end of 2013, DirecTV and Amazon, enticed by the independent’s cultivated audience, had inked deals with A24 that helped keep the operation growing. These deals further illustrate the shifting location of indie cinema away from arthouse theaters to television and computer screens, mirroring changes in the makeup and viewing preferences of the indie audience.

Moving forward, A24 sought to establish its brand as one that mixed coolness with prestige along with a healthy dose of genre fare. As the company continued to grow

⁸⁰ Tzioumakis, “The Age of Media Convergence,” *American Independent Cinema*, 290.

in size, output, and reputation, it faced the question every independent distributor eventually confronts: whether or not—and to what extent—to get into production. A24 started to answer that question in 2016.

Chapter 2: “The A24 Way of Winning”

The Witch, Moonlight, and Measuring Mid-2010s Indie Success

(January 2015–March 2017)

A24 films won three Oscars from seven nominations at the 88th Academy Awards ceremony on 28 February 2016, an unexpected haul for the still-young company. Along with Brie Larson’s expected Best Actress honor (*Room* [2015]), Asif Kapadia’s *Amy* (2015) took home Best Documentary Feature and Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina* (2015) was singled out for Best Visual Effects. *Room* was the first A24 film to be nominated for Best Picture, but Oscars prognosticators never saw it as a true contender.⁸¹ Overall, the 2016 ceremony marked the Academy’s first recognition—both in terms of nominations and wins—for A24 films, an important benchmark for any emerging independent company. Award-season attention provides potential box office bumps, but even more importantly, industry awards, especially the Oscars, confer cultural legitimacy on actors, filmmakers, and companies. A24’s Oscar wins in 2016 began a twelve-month span during which three years of buzz around the distributor transformed into widespread industrial and cultural recognition. Along with the awards came A24’s largest box office success up to that point with the arthouse horror film *The Witch* (2016). In addition, A24

⁸¹ See: Kyle Buchanan, “Vulture’s Final 2016 Oscar Predictions for Every Category,” *Vulture* (Vox Media, LLC. 27 February, 2016), <https://www.vulture.com/2016/02/vulture-oscar-predictions.html>; “2016 Oscar Predictions: Best Picture,” *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 26 February 2016), <https://www.indiewire.com/2016/02/2016-oscar-predictions-best-picture-65694/>; and Glenn Whipp, “Gold Standard: Oscar Predictions: Who’s Going to Win in all 24 Categories,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles Times 27 February 2016), <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-oscars-predictions-20160225-column.html>.

moved into production financing with *Moonlight* (2016), which went on to net the company its first Best Picture Academy Award and eventually eclipse *The Witch* as its largest financial success to date.

This chapter examines how A24 proved itself as a major player within the indie sector after just three years. This includes an industrial analysis of *The Witch* that covers the film's marketing and release strategies. The box office power of *The Witch* outpaced any of the distributor's previous releases and further solidified the company's embrace of genre films, particularly arthouse or elevated horror films. *Krishna* and *Green Room* are two other A24 releases from 2016 that exemplify arthouse films that rely heavily on recognizable elements from horror and exploitation movies.

Following my discussion of *The Witch*, I also provide a case study of the development, production, and release of *Moonlight*. A24's choice to finance this film marked a turning point in its history. *Moonlight*'s cultural and awards success catapulted the company into a new phase of corporate strategy and popular awareness. I also undertake a brief genre analysis of the film's deployment and subversion of so-called "hood film" elements and signifiers that reveals how notions of authenticity continue to be a cornerstone of indie film culture. Finally, I discuss the awards campaign that A24 mobilized behind *Moonlight* in order to reveal the cultural and industrial value of honors like the Academy Awards. I interrogate the ways in which, throughout the 2010s, awards continued to function as cultural legitimators and address how they laid bare the constant negotiation of art and commerce that is fundamental to both the indie sector and to larger Conglomerate Hollywood. But first, in order to lay a foundation for the rest of this

chapter, I briefly discuss the state of both Conglomerate Hollywood and the independent sector in 2016, the middle of a decade of continued international box office growth, the ongoing consolidation of the industry, and the proliferation of powerful streaming platforms.

THE INDIE SECTOR AND CONGLOMERATE HOLLYWOOD

The North American box office hit a record high in 2016, pulling in \$11.37 billion. Close to 50% of this revenue came from the top 20 grossing films of the year (out of nearly 700 total releases);⁸² and all but two (*Hidden Figures* and *La La Land*) were franchise blockbusters released by the major studios.⁸³ The Walt Disney Company's distribution arm was responsible for eight of these, all but two of which were based on existing intellectual property (IP) coming from Pixar Studios (*Finding Dory*), Marvel Studios (*Captain America: Civil War*), and LucasFilm (*Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*).⁸⁴ 20th Century Fox (*Deadpool*), Warner Bros. (*Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice*), Universal (*The Secret Life of Pets*), and Paramount Pictures (*Star Trek Beyond*) filled out the remaining top 12 releases, following in Disney's footsteps with franchise-affiliated movies driving large box office returns and stimulating a number of ancillary revenue

⁸² "Top 2016 Movies at the Domestic Box Office," *The Numbers* (Nash Information Services, LLC.), <https://www.the-numbers.com/box-office-records/domestic/all-movies/cumulative/released-in-2016>.

⁸³ Anthony D'Alessandro, "As Domestic B.O. Hits All-Time \$11.37B Record, The Industry Wants A Revolution: 2016 Studio Market Share – Update," *Deadline* (Deadline Publications Ltd. 3 January 2017), <https://deadline.com/2017/01/highest-grossing-movie-studios-2016-us-box-office-1201876405/>.

⁸⁴ All 2016 box office and market share figures in this section come from "Domestic Theatrical Market Summary for 2016," *The Numbers* (Nash Information Services, LLC.), <https://www.the-numbers.com/market/2016/summary>.

sources such as merchandising, licensing deals, television and streaming rights, and more. All told, Disney, the rest of the majors, and the mini-conglomerate Lionsgate commanded over 90% of the domestic market in 2016, leaving less than a tenth of the year's box office revenues for the indie sector. Considering that the number of major studio releases had been steadily trending downward since 2006 and the number of independent releases had been skyrocketing in the same period—besides a dip during 2008's financial crisis and ensuing recession—it is clear that oversaturation of product in the indie sector resulted in increased difficulty for new companies to gain a foothold in the indie landscape.⁸⁵

As total domestic market share for the indie sector tightened while the number of independent releases rose during the 2010s, we must recognize that domestic theatrical market share became less illustrative of success among indie companies. This was especially the case with genuine independents that lacked a corporate parent to absorb losses or adequately market an indie film's releases. Likewise, changes in indie film culture thanks to Video-on-Demand (VOD) and streaming services, as discussed in Chapter 1, also encourage us to complement a discussion of box office performance with more nuanced understandings of success, taking into account the strength of a brand, the value of awards recognition, and the extent of cultural cachet. While these have been markers of distinction within the indie sector for some time, they became more important in the 2010s, when the top-performing indie companies were only able to command a

⁸⁵ Based on data from *The Numbers* reproduced and analyzed by Stephen Follows, "How many films are released each year?," *Stephen Follows* (14 August 2017), <https://stephenfollows.com/how-many-films-are-released-each-year/>.

minuscule portion of the North American box office. In order to demonstrate this point further, it is useful to compare A24's 2016 domestic market share to other top indie companies.

After Lionsgate (5.89%), STX Entertainment was the highest-grossing independent in 2016 with 1.74% market share. STX's haul is largely thanks to *Bad Moms*, a raunchy R-rated comedy that pulled in over \$113 million, and other commercial films with mass audience appeal like the horror film *The Boy* and the coming-of-age comedy *The Edge of Seventeen*. Focus Features managed a 1.49% share, led by its action film *London Has Fallen*, a film with no stylistic or ideological connection to traditional definitions of indie filmmaking. Focus also released two PG-rated animated films, *Kubo and the Two Strings* and *Ratchet and Clank*, and the prestige biopics *Race* and *Loving*. Open Road Films and Roadside Attractions, meanwhile, combined for 1.62% of the domestic market by targeting similarly broad audiences with a number of releases running the gamut from conventional romantic comedies (*Mother's Day*; *Hello, My Name is Doris*) to auteur-helmed prestige films (*Snowden*, *Manchester by the Sea*). All of these companies achieved larger market shares than A24's 0.59%, but they did so by releasing commercial films exhibiting little formal, aesthetic, or generic experimentation. And while *Manchester by the Sea* received unanimous critical praise and plenty of awards recognition, it hardly defined Roadside Attractions' brand all on its own.

A24, conversely, stuck to a rather narrowly defined audience segment in 2016, resulting in lower market share, but enabling it to cultivate an easily identifiable and unique identity among other top indie companies. By releasing low-budget, young

auteur-helmed, arthouse-skewing genre films, A24 continued to cultivate and grow a well-defined and loyal audience. Most of the company's 2016 slate can be divided into three main categories: the first is made up of elevated horror and exploitation films like *The Witch*, *Krishna*, and *Green Room*; the second is comprised of offbeat, stylish, often dark comedies like *The Lobster*, *Swiss Army Man*, and *Morris from America*; and the third consists of more serious, aesthetically daring, and socially progressive dramas like *Moonlight*, *American Honey*, and *20th Century Women*. While a somewhat loose framework and consisting of some exceptions, these categories largely came to define the A24 house style moving forward. It is this house style, this reliability of genre and aesthetic experimentation, complemented by a stated commitment to finding and supporting emerging auteur filmmakers that set A24 apart from most every other indie company in the middle of the 2010s.

A24's house style and reliable brand identity not only distinguished the company from most other distributors in the indie sector, but also from the majors. In 2016, Lionsgate, STX Entertainment, and Focus Features all relied heavily on commercial action or comedy films—releases that could easily fit into the slates of the major studios. By relying on such films, these independent companies moved closer in terms of aesthetics and ideology toward mainstream Hollywood fare, thus leaving a larger gap to fill for companies committed to distinguishing themselves against commercial filmmaking with alternative types of content. Thus, as the majors' stranglehold on the domestic market allowed for fewer indie companies to shine through box office power, and as indie companies like Lionsgate and Focus catered less and less to indie culture,

A24 became the lead tastemaker in the indie film space by sticking to its unique house style. And by becoming a tastemaker, along with receiving awards attention, A24's esteem within indie film culture rose. This cultural valuation, along with growing box office power and awards successes, must be considered when judging A24's overall accomplishments as a company.

"A NEW ENGLAND FOLKTALE" OPENS NATIONWIDE

Robert Eggers' *The Witch* debuted at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival to much critical praise and nearly as much concern over how it would fare with audiences.⁸⁶ The slow-burn horror film won Eggers the festival's directing award and was co-acquired at Sundance by A24 and DirecTV for \$1.5 million.⁸⁷ Under this partnership, *The Witch* was meant to have a VOD premiere 30 days before its theatrical release. However, in the year between its acquisition and release, A24 decided not only to eschew the VOD window, but to give *The Witch* the widest release in the company's history.⁸⁸ The decision paid

⁸⁶ For positive critical responses see Rodrigo Perez, "Sundance Review: The Exquisite Holy Terror of 'The Witch' Will Chill Your Bones & Haut Your Soul," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 24 January 2015), <https://www.indiewire.com/2015/01/sundance-review-the-exquisite-holy-terror-of-the-witch-will-chill-your-bones-haut-your-soul-267876/>; and, Justin Chang, "Film Review: 'The Witch,'" *Variety* (Variety Media, LLC 23 January 2015), <https://variety.com/2015/film/reviews/sundance-film-review-the-witch-1201411310/>. And for speculation on audience performance see Jeff Sneider, "Sundance: A24, DirecTV Buy Robert Eggers' 'The Witch' (Updated)," *The Wrap* (The Wrap News Inc. 24 January 2015), <https://www.thewrap.com/sundance-a24-directv-nearing-deal-for-robert-eggers-the-witch/>; and Ramin Setoodeh and Brent Lang, "Sundance: A24 to Buy 'The Witch' for \$1.5 Million (Updated)," *Variety* (Variety Media, LLC 24 January 2015), <https://variety.com/2015/film/news/sundance-radius-twc-a24-circling-the-witch-exclusive-1201414043/>.

⁸⁷ Sneider, "A24, DirecTV Buy Robert Eggers' 'The Witch,'" <https://www.thewrap.com/sundance-a24-directv-nearing-deal-for-robert-eggers-the-witch/>.

⁸⁸ Brent Lang, "Box Office: 'Deadpool' Dominates 'The Witch,' 'Risen,'" *Variety* (Variety Media, LLC. 21 February 2016), <https://variety.com/2016/film/box-office/deadpool-box-office-witch-risen-1201711370/>.

off, resulting in the highest grossing A24 film up to that point. The film brought in over \$25 million in North America on its way to a total worldwide gross of over \$40 million,⁸⁹ on an estimated budget of \$4 million.⁹⁰ In this section I outline the reasons for *The Witch*'s unlikely financial success, which include strong online buzz fueled by A24's marketing campaign, the sustained excitement over the film within indie film culture, and a release strategy reliant on counterprogramming. Additionally, I use *The Witch* to discuss how A24 came to embrace genre filmmaking, particularly elevated horror, as a part of its house style as well as to address how the use of genre films as a corporate strategy and brand signifier both echoes but also differs from previous independent companies like Miramax and New Line.

From the time *The Witch* premiered at Sundance in late January 2015 to its theatrical release on 19 February 2016, buzz about the film built among indie and horror film fans. *The Witch* is set in 17th century New England and follows a family cast out of a Puritan colony who settle on the edge of a forest where they are plagued by supernatural occurrences. The teenaged Thomasin, the family's eldest daughter, quickly becomes the target of suspicion by her parents, eventually being accused of witchcraft by her father William. Finally, after every member of the family is killed, Thomasin is asked to sign Satan's book by the family's billy goat, Black Phillip, and joins a coven of witches. Praise for the film out of Sundance highlighted *The Witch*'s "ominous tone," its

⁸⁹ "The Witch," *Box Office Mojo* (IMDb.com, Inc.), <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r1947684865/>.

⁹⁰ "2016 Feature Film Study," *Film L.A. Inc.*, accessed 4 May 2020, https://www.filmla.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/2016_film_study_WEB.pdf.

cast, and its period specificity.⁹¹ *IndieWire* included the film in no less than 15 articles before September 2015, when the film's release date was finally announced. Among these articles were multiple best-of lists like "The 12 Major Breakouts of the 2015 Sundance Film Festival," "Best Horror Movies Since 2000," "The 20 Best Film Festival Debuts of 2015 So Far," and more.⁹² These articles addressed the film's quality and spoke to an emerging conversation over the state of the horror genre in the mid-2010s, an appraisal of a cycle of films often called "arthouse horror" or "elevated horror."⁹³ Key examples of early elevated horror films are *It Follows* and *The Babadook* (both 2014). These films, among others in the cycle, often rely on deliberate pacing and an increasing sense of dread to inspire terror rather than jump scares or explicit gore. Additionally, arthouse horror films often are recognized for their aesthetic and formal styles. Finally, discussions of elevated horror typically note a strong dose of social commentary or thematic complexity within films of the cycle, implying that the majority of horror

⁹¹ Perez, "The Exquisite Holy Terror of 'The Witch,'" <https://www.indiewire.com/2015/01/sundance-review-the-exquisite-holy-terror-of-the-witch-will-chill-your-bones-haunt-your-soul-267876/>; and Chang, "The Witch," <https://variety.com/2015/film/reviews/sundance-film-review-the-witch-1201411310/>.

⁹² See Nigel M. Smith, "The 12 Major Breakouts of the 2015 Sundance Film Festival," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 2 February 2015), <https://www.indiewire.com/2015/02/the-12-major-breakouts-of-the-2015-sundance-film-festival-248284/>; Sam Adams, "Criticwire Survey: The Best Horror Movies Since 2000," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 23 March 2015), <https://www.indiewire.com/2015/03/criticwire-survey-best-horror-movies-since-2000-131239/>; Jessica Kiang and Oliver Lyttleton, "The 20 Best Film Festival Debuts of 2015 So Far," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 9 June 2015), <https://www.indiewire.com/2015/06/the-20-best-film-festival-debuts-of-2015-so-far-263177/>.

⁹³ For popular press discussions of elevated horror see Laura Bradley, "This Was the Decade Horror Got 'Elevated,'" *Vanity Fair* (Condé Nast 17 December 2019), <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/12/rise-of-elevated-horror-decade-2010s>; Andy Crump, "How 'The Witch' Accidentally Launched a Horror Movement," *Hollywood Reporter* (The Hollywood Reporter 11 May 2019), <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/how-witch-accidentally-sparked-elevated-horror-trend-1208008>; and Tom Nicholson, "The 2010s Were the Decade When Horror Got Smart," *Esquire* (HeartsUK 20 December 2019), <https://www.esquire.com/uk/culture/film/a30284121/elevated-horror-2010s-peelee-eggars-aster-blumhouse/>.

movies are overly simplistic and are not responsive to the political or cultural moments in which they were made. Whether or not a group of films with these qualities can actually be identified and meaningfully distinguished against the rest of the horror genre, it is important to note that the existence of the elevated horror discourse relies heavily on notions of auteurism and distinctions between high and low culture. And because auteurism and cultural distinction are foundational to the discursive construction of indie film culture and also to indie marketing strategies, *The Witch*—and A24—benefited greatly by being implicated within the emerging elevated horror discourse used by critics and industry commentators throughout 2015 and early 2016.

Besides the free press *The Witch* received from articles about elevated horror and the general excitement for the film following its Sundance premiere, A24 characteristically avoided television and print ads, relying instead on an online marketing campaign of trailers and featurettes targeting cinephiles and horror fans. *The Witch*'s first trailer was posted to YouTube on 19 August 2015 and utilized a number of tactics to target audiences. The first minute of the trailer highlights the period specificity and detail, featuring the 17th century American English accent and dialect along with the strong presence of Puritanical religiosity. Next, the Sundance Film Festival laurel appears, boasting of Eggers' Director Award win, thereby signaling the film's indie credentials to audiences while also singling out the quality of an unknown filmmaker to cinephiles. Finally, the last minute of the trailer is intercut with a number of critics' quotes testifying to *The Witch*'s terror: the film is called "one of the most genuinely unnerving horror films in recent memory," "a nightmarish picture that will make your blood run cold," "soul-



The Witch featured completely handcrafted sets, props, and costumes. Director Robert Eggers insisted on strict period specificity to heighten the horror of his “New England Folktale.” And the film’s devotion to authenticity won it acclaim from critics and horror fans alike. A24. [2016]. From *Slate*. <https://slate.com/culture/2016/02/horror-movie-the-witch-reviewed.html>.

shaking,” “disturbing,” and the experience of viewing it is described as feeling “like we’re watching something we should not be seeing.”⁹⁴ The critics’ endorsements work to assuage any hesitations that potential audience members may have had due to the period-specific language, which is genuinely difficult to understand on a first viewing. A24 deployed the critics’ testimony to reassure horror fans that despite the language and festival accolades, *The Witch* is a visceral experience that satisfies the most basic horror genre expectation—that a horror film should shock and terrify audiences.

⁹⁴ A24, “The Witch | Official Trailer HD | A24,” 19 August 2015, video, 2:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQXmIf3Sefg>.

In the two weeks before *The Witch*'s theatrical release, A24 uploaded three featurettes to YouTube that offered potential viewers a glimpse at extra footage not included in trailers along with information from Eggers about the production and attention to 17th century details. In "A 17th Century Nightmare," Eggers tells the audience that witches were present in all of his earliest childhood nightmares, encouraging viewers to identify the film as a singular product of Eggers as a filmmaker. Such a move helps to construct an auteurist persona around the director.⁹⁵ The cultivation of Eggers as an auteur attached an aura of quality and distinction to *The Witch* for viewers seeking to distinguish themselves against more mainstream horror fare. By doing this, A24 embraced the broad audience appeal of the traditional horror genre, while simultaneously reassuring members of cinephile and indie culture that this was an elevated version of what is often delegitimated as low culture. Likewise, Eggers informs viewers that "in recreating this authentic idea of what 17th century New England would be, we had to make everything, 'cause there was no way we could fake it. This was the high bar that we all needed to go to in order to say 'a witch could be real.'"⁹⁶ By underscoring Eggers' obsessing over period authenticity, A24 again attempted to mark *The Witch* as more than a typical horror film—both more terrifying for its reality and more culturally valuable for its commitment to authenticity.

In an effort to drum up more publicity prior to *The Witch*'s theatrical premiere, A24 partnered with the Satanic Temple, a non-theistic religious group that opposes

⁹⁵ A24, "The Witch | A 17th Century Nightmare | Official Featurette HD | A24," 10 February 2016, video, 1:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBu0fg7ASUk>.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

traditional Christian values and their role in American public life.⁹⁷ A24 sent a screener of the film to Jex Blackmore, the national spokesperson for the Satanic Temple, months ahead of its release. Blackmore and other members of the Temple enjoyed *The Witch* and decided to give it the organization's first official endorsement of any film because its themes "mirrored" the work of the Temple, namely "a criticism of theocratic patriarchal society." A24 and the Satanic Temple then organized a number of early screenings in major cities across the country for members of the organization that included "ritualistic elements and speeches" intended to make guests "feel empowered."⁹⁸ Blackmore also speaks in one of the featurettes released by A24 prior to the film's release, adding historical and religious context to *The Witch* for curious viewers.⁹⁹ Besides the publicity created by A24's involvement with the Satanic Temple, the partnership further distinguished the distributor from other film companies by embracing an organization that could alienate many conservative commentators, critics, and audiences. By securing and exploiting the Satanic Temple's endorsement, A24 exhibited the desire for its brand to be associated with subcultural elements, further distinguishing itself—and by extension, its audience—from mainstream film culture, and thus, cultivating its identity as truly alternative and independent.

All of the above aided in creating impressive online pre-release buzz for *The Witch*—the best buzz for an A24 film, in fact, since *Spring Breakers* (2013). According to

⁹⁷ "About Us," The Satanic Temple, accessed 8 January 2021, <https://thesatanictemple.com/pages/about-us>.

⁹⁸ Brent Lang, "How 'The Witch' scored the Satanic Temple's Endorsement," *Variety* (Variety Media, LLC. 21 February 2016), <https://variety.com/2016/film/box-office/the-witch-satanic-temple-1201711408/>.

⁹⁹ A24, "The Satanic Revolution | The Witch x The Satanic Temple | Official Featurette HD," 2 February 2016, video, 1:57, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4nhmTR9bc0>.

ListenFirst Media's Digital Audience Ratings (DAR), which tracks user action and engagement with films' official profiles and pages on Facebook, Google+, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and Wikipedia, *The Witch* had been engaged with over 5 million times in the week spanning from 27 January to 2 February. This meant that three weeks before the film's nationwide release, a significant amount of potential audience members were aware of and interested in *The Witch*. The only films that bested *The Witch*'s DAR score in the same week were *Deadpool*, *The Angry Birds Movie*, and *Suicide Squad*, three major studio blockbusters associated with well-known IP and that had massive marketing budgets behind them.¹⁰⁰ Besides this promising online buzz, A24 executives expected strong opening weekend numbers for *The Witch* due to its uniqueness among other releases. The film was set to open against the second weekend of Twentieth Century Fox's phenomenally successful *Deadpool*, the openings of Sony's faith-based Affirm Films' *Risen*, and Focus Features' *Race*, a Jesse Owens biopic.¹⁰¹ With *The Witch* as the only independent and horror film slated for domestic release, A24 depended on capturing the cinephiles and horror fans its marketing campaign had targeted for months and who may not have been attracted to the weekend's other offerings.

¹⁰⁰ Jason Klein, "A24's 'The Witch' #1 Film Since 'Spring Breakers,'" *Variety* (Variety Media, LLC 3 February 2016), <https://variety.com/2016/more/news/a24s-the-witch-1-film-since-spring-breakers-1201695826/>.

¹⁰¹ Brent Lang, "Box Office: 'Deadpool' Dominates 'The Witch,' 'Risen,'" *Variety* (Variety Media, LLC. 21 February 2016), <https://variety.com/2016/film/box-office/deadpool-box-office-witch-risen-1201711370/>.

The film opened in 2,046 theaters nationwide, bringing in \$8.8 million and coming in fourth for the weekend, the strongest opening yet for A24,¹⁰² and a start that led to the best box office gross of any A24 film up to that point, a final tally of \$25,138,705 domestically.¹⁰³ That A24 opened the film so successfully while eschewing a platform release did not go unnoticed by the trades. *IndieWire*'s Zack Scharf, along with other writers, set the film up as a test case, noting that Open Road had unsuccessfully attempted a wide release of the crowd-pleasing coming-of-age *Dope* the year before, taking a financial hit.¹⁰⁴ *The Witch*'s ability to fill theaters across the country was further proof that A24 had a knack for attracting audiences to quality independent films by focusing its marketing campaigns on traditional indie discourses of auteurism and distinction. At the same time, *The Witch*'s box office success encouraged A24 to continue acquiring and championing genre films, especially those the company could tout as elevated auteurist examples of exploitation pictures.

A24's reliance on genre films like *The Witch* reveals fundamental differences in indie film culture from the Sundance-Miramax era. Up through 2016, in addition to *The Witch*, the company's output of genre or exploitation films had included *Under the Skin* (2014), *Tusk* (2014), *Krishna*, and *Green Room*. In the same period, A24 distributed a number of films that skewed closer to the prestige end of the indie spectrum, including

¹⁰² "Domestic 2016 Weekend 8," Box Office Mojo, accessed 9 January 2021, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/weekend/2016W08/>.

¹⁰³ "The Witch," *Box Office Mojo* (IMDb.com, Inc.), <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r1947684865/>.

¹⁰⁴ Zack Sharf, "Horror sensation 'The Witch' Is Opening Sooner than Expected," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 8 January 2016), <https://www.indiewire.com/2016/01/horror-sensation-the-witch-is-opening-sooner-than-expected-38823/>.

movies such as *A Most Violent Year* (2014), *The End of the Tour* (2015), *Room*, *Moonlight*, and *20th Century Women*. Notably, A24 did not and, at the time of writing, still has not created a separate division to handle either types of these films. This was markedly different from Miramax and New Line, the two dominant indie companies of the 1990s. New Line Cinema specialized in genre, exploitation, and generally lowbrow fare throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The company opened Fine Line Features in 1991 as a specialty division—i.e., to handle quality indie films. Conversely, Miramax’s brand relied on releasing arthouse and prestige indie fare. Nonetheless, it opened Dimension Films in 1992 to focus on genre and exploitation pictures that could bring in more money to the parent company.

These stylistic divisions at New Line and Miramax underscore that in the 1980s and early 1990s indie film culture depended on a hierarchy of value that prized social realism and arthouse filmmaking much more than genre pictures. Thus, Miramax made its name, and helped to usher in the indie boom, with films like *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) and *My Left Foot* (1989). Such quality films hardly brought in enough money for Miramax to continue to expand, however. Geoff King argues that the creation of Dimension allowed for Miramax “to profit from the very mainstream-seeming genre features while maintaining the ‘quality’ market associations of the Miramax brand.”¹⁰⁵ At the same time, New Line was financially successful by attracting young audiences with films like *The Nightmare on Elm Street* series and *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*

¹⁰⁵ Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005), 44.

films, but needed Fine Line to break into the quality indie market. A24, conversely, avoided creating a separate division to focus on its genre films, a move that would have maintained a singular brand identity based on indie prestige for the company. Instead A24 fully integrated genre films, especially horror movies, into its brand ID, thus avoiding perceptions of middle brow pretentiousness or the illusion that it sought to capture aging Boomers at the expense of indie coolness. Whereas Miramax worried that embracing genre fare would negatively alter its brand and New Line felt the need to create Fine Line to release more prestigious indie films, A24's commitment to Millennial and Gen-Z audiences necessitated that genre films remained core to its house style alongside its more social-realist or arthouse films.

The Witch's strong box office and A24 films' respectable showing at the Oscars marked a strong start to 2016. They were also noted by trade outlets as the main reasons A24 secured an expanded credit line in late February, representing a boost from \$50 million to \$125 million.¹⁰⁶ The additional funds allowed the company to extend its operations into production financing of film and television, new paths A24 had begun to explore in 2015. But as the company evolved into a distribution *and* financing operation, a move that has changed many independents into more conservative brands in the past, elevated horror and exploitation films like *The Witch* and *Green Room* continued to be an integral part of A24's house style.

¹⁰⁶ Brent Lang, "A24 Expands Credit Facility to \$125 Million on Strength of 'Room,' 'The Witch,'" *Variety* (Variety Media, LLC. 23 February 2016), <https://variety.com/2016/film/news/a24-credit-facility-room-the-witch-1201713032/>.

MOONLIGHT MAKES A24 A MICRO-STUDIO

With Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight*, A24 got into the business of film financing and production. Such an expansion, what Geoff King calls becoming a "micro-studio," fundamentally alters the way a distributor does business.¹⁰⁷ It must now contend with a number of variables in the development, production, and post-production of a film not present when a company merely acquires a finished product at a film festival. Considering the greater financial investment and risk, such variables certainly encourage a more conservative approach to choosing which projects to handle and which to pass on. King recounts that in the late 1980s a number of "small [independent] distributors made the risky but tempting move into the financing or production of features," going belly up rather soon after, explaining that "the micro-studios thought they could pick winners, but were put at risk when they invested in a number of films that turned out to be commercial failures."¹⁰⁸ A major challenge in expanding operations into financing is the ever-increasing costs of both production and marketing. This factor is exacerbated if the company in question attempts to compete with the majors. A24's choice to partner with Plan B Entertainment, an independent production company run by Brad Pitt, Dede Gardner, and Jeremy Kleiner, in financing *Moonlight* mitigated some of the possible problems and risks outlined above. First, production costs were kept incredibly low with a budget of \$1.2 million.¹⁰⁹ Second, A24 managed to keep marketing costs low by largely relying on its now standard practice of online advertising and by exploiting the

¹⁰⁷ King, *American Independent Cinema*, 25.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Barry Jenkins, Twitter post, 28 February 2018, 5:06 pm, <https://twitter.com/BarryJenkins/status/968985836439052288>.

recognizability of its brand while utilizing targeted radio, television, and print advertisements in a handful of key markets.¹¹⁰ Finally, *Moonlight* was decidedly not a major studio picture. The film's subject matter, narrative structure, lack of recognizable star power, among much else, distinguished it from the releases of the majors and most other indie studios, instead targeting underserved niche audiences.

A24's decision to finance and co-produce *Moonlight* was announced in August 2015, when the company released a statement expressing excitement for "the opportunity to work with Barry [Jenkins], one of the most talented and daring contemporary directors, and Plan B, who consistently provide a home for filmmakers...."¹¹¹ Jenkins hadn't made a movie since his debut, *Medicine for Melancholy* (2009), a microbudget romance that focused on gentrification in San Francisco. *Medicine* was received well on the festival circuit and among critics, eventually getting a limited release from IFC Films. But Jenkins spent the next several years struggling to get a project off the ground.¹¹² Adele Romanski, a producer who attended Florida State University with Jenkins, reached out to the filmmaker in 2013 in hopes of developing a project together.¹¹³ By that time Jenkins already had a copy of playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney's "In Moonlight Black Boys

¹¹⁰ Peter Bart, "Peter Bart: 'Moonlight' Success Illuminates Press-Shy A24; Mel Brooks Re-Animates 'Young Frankenstein,'" *Deadline* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 1 December 2016), <https://deadline.com/2016/12/moonlight-a24-oscar-season-1201862719/>.

¹¹¹ Ali Jaafar, "A24 Teams Up with Plan B and Adele Romanski to Produce and Finance Barry Jenkins' 'Moonlight,'" *Deadline* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 24 August 2015), <https://deadline.com/2015/08/barry-jenkins-moonlight-a24-plan-b-ex-machina-brad-pitt-amy-winehouse-cary-fukunaga-1201504815/>.

¹¹² Rene Rodriguez, "Miami Plays a Starring Role in the Glorious 'Moonlight,'" *The Miami Herald* (Miami Herald Media Company 21 October 2016), <https://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/movies-news-reviews/article109699627.html>.

¹¹³ *Producers Guild of America*, "'Moonlight' producer Adele Romanski discusses Barry Jenkins and the producing team," 23 March 2017, video, 3:29, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytbeeqls1so>.

Look Blue,” an autobiographical piece often identified as an unproduced play, but actually closer in format to a film script.¹¹⁴ Jenkins recognized much of his own life in McCraney’s story—both men grew up in the Liberty City neighborhood of Miami—and wrote a film adaptation that injected some of his own experience into the narrative and lengthened the third act, eventually getting McCraney’s blessing to move forward with the film.

Jenkins and Romanski secured Plan B’s involvement shortly after a chance meeting at the Telluride Film Festival in August 2013 with executives from the production company.¹¹⁵ Plan B had built a strong reputation since its founding in 2001 for producing independent and auteur-helmed films that went on to great critical success, including *The Departed* (2006) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013), both of which won the Academy Award for Best Picture. According to A24 head of acquisitions and production Noah Sacco, the choice to move into production financing was a “right time, right place” opportunity, telling *Screen Daily*: “We were fans of Barry, and in a cosmic way he came up in a meeting. We’d been saying one day how wonderful *Medicine* was and wondered what Barry was up to. Then [Plan B’s] Jeremy [Kleiner] mentioned this new project and, if memory serves, it was the same week.”¹¹⁶ Serendipity and fate were ever present concepts in comments by *Moonlight*’s filmmakers and executives at Plan B and A24

¹¹⁴ Dan Allen, “Tarell Alvin McCraney: The Man Who Lived ‘Moonlight,’” *NBC News* (NBC Universal 20 October 2016), <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/tarell-alvin-mccraney-man-who-lived-moonlight-n670296>.

¹¹⁵ *Producers Guild of America*, “‘Moonlight’ producer Adele Romanski,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytbeeqls1so>.

¹¹⁶ Jeremy Kay, “Production Focus: Barry Jenkins’ ‘Moonlight,’” *Screen Daily* (Media Business Insight Limited 10 September 2016), <https://www.screendaily.com/features/production-focus-barry-jenkinss-moonlight/5109293.article>.

regarding the development and production of the film. The veracity of such comments aside, they went a long way toward mythologizing the project and the individual agents and companies involved in its production and release, a strategy deployed in *Moonlight*'s marketing and its ensuing awards campaign.

Covering *Moonlight*'s \$1.2 million budget gave A24 the film's worldwide distribution rights. While Plan B executives oversaw production, A24 took a hands-off approach, readily agreeing to the filmmakers' requests that *Moonlight* be shot on location in Liberty City, Miami over five weeks.¹¹⁷ Sacco ascribed A24's lack of creative interference to its auteur-friendly brand identity, explaining: "We're very filmmaker-driven and want to work on things that are very original."¹¹⁸ A24's hands-off approach to *Moonlight*'s production lent itself to a marketing campaign that focused heavily on the personal authenticity and local specificity of the film's narrative and themes. As mentioned earlier, auteurist notions of creative freedom and personal storytelling have been foundational to discourses surrounding independent filmmaking. Janet Staiger points out that as far back as the 1960s, previously self-labeled *avant-garde* and experimental filmmakers began to use the terms "personal" and "independent" to describe their work as the auteur theory became more popular.¹¹⁹ Additionally, Yannis Tzioumakis notes that in the early 1980s, even before the indie boom, "regional

¹¹⁷ Zach Baron, "How A24 Is Disrupting Hollywood," *GQ* (Condé Nast 9 May 2017), <https://www.gq.com/story/a24-studio-oral-history>.

¹¹⁸ Kay, "Production Focus: Barry Jenkins' 'Moonlight,'" <https://www.screendaily.com/features/production-focus-barry-jenkinss-moonlight/5109293.article>.

¹¹⁹ Janet Staiger, "Independent of what? Sorting out differences from Hollywood," *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, ed. Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 13.

authenticity,” along with formal and narrative deviations, were used to distinguish independent filmmaking from mainstream Hollywood product.¹²⁰ Barry Jenkins’ connection to the Liberty City neighborhood became a fundamental aspect of the discourse surrounding *Moonlight* just as Spike Lee’s personal connection to the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn and Richard Linklater’s to Austin, Texas were inextricable from the reception of *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *Slacker* (1990), two foundational films in the indie canon.

Jenkins’ return to Liberty City for the production of *Moonlight* was covered heavily by the press at the time of the film’s release and into awards season, exemplified by article titles like the *Miami Herald*’s “Miami Plays a Starring Role in the Glorious ‘Moonlight,’” the *Los Angeles Times*’ “To Give Birth to ‘Moonlight,’ Writer-Director Barry Jenkins Dug Deep into His Past,” and the *New York Times*’ “From Bittersweet Childhoods to ‘Moonlight.’”¹²¹ In each, Jenkins details his personal connection to the film, saying that directing *Moonlight* “was very visceral, like working an open wound.”¹²² At the same time, the writer-director cited Liberty City and its culture as a co-

¹²⁰ Yannis Tzioumakis, “‘Independent’, ‘Indie’ and ‘Indiewood’: towards a periodisation of contemporary (post-1980) American independent cinema,” *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, ed. Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis New York: Routledge, 2013), 31.

¹²¹ Rodriguez, “Miami Plays a Starring Role,” <https://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/movies-news-reviews/article109699627.html>; Rebecca Keegan, “To Give Birth to ‘Moonlight,’ Writer-Director Barry Jenkins Dug Deep into His Past,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles Times 21 October 2016), <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-moonlight-barry-jenkins-feature-20161006-snap-story.html>; and Nikole Hannah-Jones, “From Bittersweet Childhoods to ‘Moonlight,’” *New York Times* (The New York Times Company 4 January 2017), https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/04/movies/moonlight-barry-jenkins-tarell-alvin-mccrancy-interview.html?_r=1.

¹²² Hannah-Jones, “From Bittersweet Childhoods,” https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/04/movies/moonlight-barry-jenkins-tarell-alvin-mccrancy-interview.html?_r=1.

author of the film, explaining “I had to re-prove my bona fides.... It’s like, ‘Who the hell is this guy?’ We’re shooting in the roughest neighborhood in Miami. I get there and the guys were basically like, ‘No disrespect, Mr. Jenkins, but it shouldn’t be like that.’ They were helping me write. They’d say, ‘Nobody out here uses their government names.’ It was about them taking possession of the piece.”¹²³ Comments like this one reinforced a notion of authenticity to *Moonlight*’s narrative which, along with its small budget and thematic content, firmly distinguished it from mainstream Hollywood filmmaking.

According to Jenkins, another key strategy to communicate reality in *Moonlight* was to avoid aesthetic conventions typically associated with the “hood films” of the early 1990s. Katharine Bausch describes these films as comprising “aesthetically contemporary urban settings, young Black male protagonists, and an emphasis on nihilistic violence.”¹²⁴ Robin M. Boylorn adds that early hood films like *Boyz N The Hood* (1991), *Menace II Society* (1993), and even the comedy *Friday* (1995) “presented Black men and Black masculinity as invulnerable, dangerous, and endangered, within the limited confines of the(ir) ghetto.”¹²⁵ Key to these representations are typically gritty and documentary-like realist depictions of the urban inner-city meant to communicate the oppressiveness of the socio-economic realities of American Black childhood and adolescence. Jenkins, however, did not associate his growing up with such “miserablist” aesthetics, asserting

¹²³ Rodriguez, “Miami Plays a Starring Role,” <https://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/movies-news-reviews/article109699627.html>.

¹²⁴ Katharine Bausch, “Superflies into Superkillers: Black Masculinity in Film from Blaxploitation to New Black Realism,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 46, no. 2 (April 2013): 258, doi: 10.1111/jpcu.12025.

¹²⁵ Robin M. Boylorn, “From Boys to Men: Hip-Hop, Hood Films, and the Performance of Contemporary Black Masculinity,” *Black Camera* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 148, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/blackcamera.8.2.09>.



Moonlight writer-director Barry Jenkins and director of photography James Laxton intentionally set out to subvert the realist aesthetics of the hood film genre to reflect Jenkins' own coming-of-age in Liberty City, Miami. A24. [2016]. From *Spin*. <https://www.spin.com/featured/barry-jenkins-moonlight-review/>.

that “even though my childhood was dark, you can’t say it was visually repressive. Miami is the exact *opposite* of that. It’s a place where you could choose to go to the beach if you want; it can be a very lush place. We knew we didn’t want to make a gritty, neo-realist urban tale about growing up in the hood. My life growing up in the hood...still felt beautiful.”¹²⁶

The formal differences in *Moonlight* from earlier hood films indicate the ways in which its narrative significantly differs from most of the genre. While protagonist

¹²⁶ David Fear, “‘Moonlight’: How an Indie Filmmaker Made the Best Movie of 2016,” *Rolling Stone* (Rolling Stone, LLC 21 October 2016), <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-features/moonlight-how-an-indie-filmmaker-made-the-best-movie-of-2016-119405/>.

Chiron's coming-of-age in Liberty City is characterized by the presence of drugs, violence, and the negotiation of Black masculinity, all hallmarks of the hood film, his emerging homosexuality presents a new intersection of identity within the genre. Although the performance of hyper-masculinity is inherent to the homosocial bonding traditionally at the center of hood films, Chiron's gayness isolates him from nearly all of his male peers. This alienation results in Chiron spending much of the film in silence and/or alone. *Moonlight*, therefore, highlights the inner-life of its protagonist through impressionistic formal strategies that reveal character and thematic development, thus subverting stark realist genre conventions.

Recognizable genre elements and their subversions were key to the marketing strategy deployed by A24 for *Moonlight*. The film's first trailer was released on 11 August 2016, three weeks ahead of its festival premiere at Telluride. The trailer revealed the tripartite structure of the film while courting multiple demographics.¹²⁷ Despite being largely devoid of recognizable stars, the film's entirely Black cast promises representation for audiences looking for more Black stories. The trailer also alludes to Chiron's homosexuality, courting viewers who seek out queer or gay films. The presence of these two identities also promises a rather novel depiction of Black masculinity not often represented in Hollywood dramas, where Black men are typically relegated to stereotypical performances of heterosexual hyper-masculinity. The trailer largely obscures the hood film elements of *Moonlight* and instead plays up the coming-of-age

¹²⁷ A24, "Moonlight | Official Trailer HD | A24," 11 August 2016, video, 1:55, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NJj12tJzqc&feature=emb_title.

narrative conventions. While hood films often are coming-of-age narratives, by obfuscating the former, *Moonlight*'s trailer avoids turning off potential viewers concerned over the often stereotypical depictions of Black men in hood films and simultaneously pitches the film as a universal story. Finally, the three-part structure of the film, its remarkable visual style, and the moving Nicholas Britnell score point to an arthouse-skewing independent film geared to cinephile and indie audiences. This notion is also communicated through the "From Director Barry Jenkins" credit that appears in the trailer. Despite Jenkins' lack of notoriety—having only made one previous feature which did not command mass audience attention—the credit effectively bestows auteur stature to the filmmaker and thus elevates the seriousness of *Moonlight* to audiences who would consider themselves cinephiles or members of the indie film culture. In the ways briefly outlined above, the trailer, along with the larger marketing campaign, worked to target a number of niche audiences collectively defined effectively by Jenkins' half-joking description of the film itself: "a hood-arthouse coming-of-age LGBT drama."¹²⁸

A24 opted for a rather traditional platform release for *Moonlight*, starting with four theaters in New York and Los Angeles on 21 October 2016. That opening weekend provided a remarkably strong start, resulting in a per-theater average of \$103,685, the best for any distributor since *The Revenant* the previous year.¹²⁹ The next weekend *Moonlight* opened in more big cities like Miami, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C., where

¹²⁸ Will Stephenson, "Where's the Next Film, Barry?" *Fader* (The Fader, Inc.), <https://www.thefader.com/2016/10/04/moonlight-movie-barry-jenkins-director-interview>.

¹²⁹ Tom Brueggmann, "Arthouse Audit: 'Moonlight' Soars to Near-Record Levels; 'The Handmaiden' Beats the Odds," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 23 October 2016), <https://www.indiewire.com/2016/10/arthouse-audit-moonlight-box-office-record-the-handmaiden-1201739455/>.

there are large Black populations and where A24 worked hard to reach out to diverse audiences through social media and on radio and television.¹³⁰ The film went wide on 4 November, and by then its strong box office performance and unanimously positive critical reviews had created strong buzz. *Moonlight* performed well throughout the rest of 2016 and up to the announcement of the Oscar nominations on 24 January 2017, with a domestic gross of \$15.7 million.¹³¹ The film received a huge boost from its eight nominations, including Best Picture, Director, Adapted Screenplay, and in both Supporting Acting categories. The weekend following the nominations, *Moonlight* widened to over 1,100 theaters, more than doubling its engagements from the previous week.¹³² By the time the Oscars ceremony aired on 26 February, *Moonlight* was in its twentieth week of theatrical release and had grossed over \$22 million.¹³³ A24's first gamble on production financing had paid off at the box office with *Moonlight* on its way to overtake *The Witch* as the company's highest grossing release to date.

Prior to the Oscars ceremony, it was widely assumed that Summit's *La La Land* would dominate the night, with some prognosticators lamenting that in a more progressive time or with a more progressive voting body *Moonlight* could do well.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Peter Bart, "Peter Bart: 'Moonlight' Success Illuminates Press-Shy A24; Mel Brooks Re-Animates 'Young Frankenstein,'" *Deadline* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 1 December 2016), <https://deadline.com/2016/12/moonlight-a24-oscar-season-1201862719/>.

¹³¹ "Weekend Domestic Chart for January 20, 2017," *The Numbers*, accessed 14 January 2021, <https://www.the-numbers.com/box-office-chart/weekend/2017/01/20>.

¹³² "Weekend Domestic Chart for January 27, 2017," *The Numbers*, accessed 14 January 2021, <https://www.the-numbers.com/box-office-chart/weekend/2017/01/27>.

¹³³ "Weekend Domestic Chart for February 24, 2017," *The Numbers*, accessed 14 January 2021, <https://www.the-numbers.com/box-office-chart/weekend/2017/02/24>.

¹³⁴ See Mike Hogan, et. al., "Oscar Predictions 2017: Which Nominees Will Win Big?" *Vanity Fair* (Condé Nast 21 February 2017), <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/02/oscar-predictions-2017>;

These two vastly different films, their For Your Consideration campaigns, and the discourses surrounding the 2017 awards season reveal much about the state of Conglomerate Hollywood, the indie sector, Hollywood's relationship to national politics, and the importance of awards—all of which I take up in the following section.

THE ACADEMY AWARDS IN A CHANGING GLOBAL FILM CULTURE

The Academy Awards function as one of Hollywood's most important sources of cultural and industrial legitimization for actors, filmmakers, and companies. The Oscars often provide significant box office bumps to the films nominated and especially to those that win. Of equal importance, the Oscars can create stars and household names of actors and directors previously not well known to the broader public, thus bringing individuals more negotiating leverage and potential creative power within the cultural industries. Meanwhile, companies, while benefiting financially from Oscar nominations and wins, are also eager to associate themselves with prestigious and culturally important work, at least as defined by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS). This association can draw high-level talent to studios and production companies for future work. The financial and talent incentives of Oscars' attention is even more important for small or young companies striving to attract sources of financing and star power,

Christopher Orr, "My 2017 Oscar Predictions: A Lot of *La La Land*," *The Atlantic* (24 February 2017), <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/02/my-2017-oscar-predictions/517677/>; and Peter Travers, "2017 Oscar Predictions: Who Should Win, Who Will Win," *Rolling Stone* (Rolling Stone, LLC. 15 February 2017), <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-news/2017-oscar-predictions-who-should-win-who-will-win-129373/>.

according to Geoff King.¹³⁵ This leads film studios and distributors to spend millions of dollars every year launching For Your Consideration (FYC) campaigns behind their films. These FYC campaigns, which dominate the pages of trade press outlets like *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter* along with billboards and bus stops throughout Los Angeles, lay bare the tension between art and commerce inherent within the media industries. According to James F. English, this tension is a key point on the broader field of cultural production in which negotiations of different forms of capital—cultural, economic, political, social—are constantly taking place.¹³⁶ The Oscars, like all awards, are primarily involved in the creation and dissemination of value, with all of the social, political, and economic implications inherent to processes of cultural valuation. This is a productive frame with which to approach the 2017 Academy Awards considering that the discourses surrounding it were replete with so many intersections of socio-political interest, such as the brand new Trump presidency and the #OscarsSoWhite controversy.

A24's FYC campaign for *Moonlight* focused on the political and social importance of the film's narrative and themes. According to Jenkins, "*Moonlight* is a story that hasn't been told. Whether placed as queer black cinema or urban male cinema, the lack of coming-of-age films featuring people like Chiron and set in places like inner-city Miami is pronounced and unfortunate."¹³⁷ This was the central pitch of *Moonlight*'s awards campaign—i.e., that the film features underrepresented subjects and thus stands

¹³⁵ King, *American Independent Cinema*, 47.

¹³⁶ James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 10.

¹³⁷ Eric Kohn, "Barry Jenkins' 'Moonlight' Journey: How the Year's Great Discovery Became an American Cinema Milestone," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC 19 October 2016), <https://www.indiewire.com/2016/10/barry-jenkins-moonlight-interview-1201737807/>.

as a novel story worth rewarding. According to the FYC ads and the awards race discourses that they helped to foster, *Moonlight* represented the future of American cinema and an opportunity for the Academy to take a step toward a more politically and socially progressive outlook. In contrast, *La La Land*, the film *Vanity Fair* called a “major, major” favorite to take home Best Picture,¹³⁸ presented a look backward, a brash embrace of nostalgia for old Hollywood and, thus, a fond remembrance of a more conservative industry and culture. Additionally, the fact that *La La Land* included very few people of color made it a perfect discursive foil to *Moonlight*.

The *Moonlight-La La Land* matchup cannot be understood outside of the political context of late 2016 and early 2017, as Barack Obama’s presidency was followed by Donald Trump’s. At the same time, *Moonlight* offered a chance for the Academy to respond to the complaints of #OscarsSoWhite by recognizing the accomplishments of the film’s all-Black cast and its many Black craftspeople. With all of this in mind, is it surprising that Oscar predictors at *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, *Deadline*, and *Entertainment Weekly*, among a host of other publications, assumed *La La Land* would take home Best Picture along with a number of other awards?¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Hogan, et. al., “Oscar Predictions 2017,” <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/02/oscar-predictions-2017>.

¹³⁹ Travers, “2017 Oscar Predictions,” <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-news/2017-oscar-predictions-who-should-win-who-will-win-129373/>; Hogan, et. al., “Oscar Predictions 2017,” <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/02/oscar-predictions-2017>; Pete Hammond, “Pete Hammond’s Final Oscar Predictions in Every Category,” *Deadline* (Penske Business Media, LLC 26 February 2017), <https://deadline.com/2017/02/oscar-best-picture-best-director-best-actor-actress-handicaps-news-1201924958/>; and Nicole Sperling, “Oscars 2017: Our Final Predictions in Major Categories,” *Entertainment Weekly* (Meredith Corporation 17 February 2017), <https://ew.com/oscars/2017/02/17/oscar-2017-predictions-best-picture-actor-actress-director/>.



A For Your Consideration billboard above Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood that pitches *Moonlight* as the progressive choice for Oscar voters. [2017]. From *Daily Billboard*. <https://www.dailybillboardblog.com/2017/01/moonlight-movie-billboard.html>.

The assumption that the Academy would choose to reward *La La Land* over *Moonlight* reveals that trade and popular press commentators viewed the Academy, and the industry it represents, as politically and socially conservative in terms of its processes of cultural valuation. The fact that *La La Land* won the top prize at a number of earlier industry guild and trade association awards ceremonies—e.g., the Directors Guild of America, Producers Guild of America, American Cinema Editors, among others—was cited by commentators Cara Buckley and Emily VanDerWerff as the main reasons the

film would undeniably take home the Oscar for Best Picture.¹⁴⁰ These and other commentators, along with popular film critics such as Peter Travers, simultaneously argued that *Moonlight* wouldn't win and that it deserved the award over *La La Land* because of its social relevance. The gap between what *would* win and what *should* win, according to prognosticators, illustrated the ways in which the Academy, and Conglomerate Hollywood more broadly, was seen by industry commentators and critics in the 2010s as out of touch with American political and social values.

Such a view ignored the fact that *La La Land* made an impressive \$141 million at the domestic box office by the time the Academy Awards aired.¹⁴¹ Thus, the discursive construction of the *Moonlight* vs. *La La Land* “battle” reveals that some cultural intermediaries, in this case film critics and industry commentators, continued to rely on a hierarchical determination of value that privileged arthouse filmmaking over commercial filmmaking and, thus, discounted and devalued the tastes of mass audiences. In this way, the 2017 Oscars acted as what English calls a “nodal point for communitarian identification and pride, a means of positing an ‘us’ and an ‘our’ around which to rally some group of individuals.”¹⁴² Film critics and industry commentators that contributed to the *Moonlight-La La Land* “battle” utilized the two films and the Oscars as points of distinction, aligning themselves and their tastes with certain political and social values in

¹⁴⁰ Cara Buckley, “And the Oscars Winners Will Be,” *New York Times* (The New York Times Company 23 February 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/23/movies/oscar-predictions-2017.html>; and Emily VanDerWerff, “Oscar Predictions 2017: Best Picture, Best Director, and the Screenplay Prizes,” *Vox* (Vox Media, LLC 22 February 2017), <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/2/22/14691028/oscar-predictions-best-picture-la-la-land>.

¹⁴¹ “Weekend Domestic Chart for February 24, 2017,” <https://www.the-numbers.com/box-office-chart/weekend/2017/02/24>.

¹⁴² English, *The Economy of Prestige*, 51.

their acknowledgement that *Moonlight* should win Best Picture, while simultaneously reinforcing their assumed expertise in the machinations of the film industry and the awards-giving process by predicting *La La Land*'s inevitable victory.

Of course, the voting members of the Academy went on to award Best Picture to *Moonlight* in a shocking ceremonial glitch in which *La La Land* was first incorrectly announced as the winner. As *La La Land* producer Jordan Horowitz relayed to the audience that there had been a mistake and that, in fact, *Moonlight* had won the award, the crowd inside the Dolby Theater in Hollywood stood up and erupted in applause.¹⁴³ It was a triumphant moment for A24 and the *Moonlight* filmmakers, a reminder of the exciting possibilities of live television, and an embarrassing faux pas for the Academy as an institution in a moment meant to signal its shifting values. As the highest profile awards ceremony for the global film industry, the Oscars have a unique authority to impart cultural value on and assist in the cultural consecration of films. Maintaining this appearance of institutional and industrial authority is the primary function of the Academy, because without such an appearance the importance of the awards decreases. Responding to criticism—or, at least, creating the perception that it has responded to criticism—is integral to maintaining industrial authority and cultural relevance for the Academy. The institution's response to #OscarsSoWhite and even its awarding *Parasite* (2019) the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2020 reflected a changing global film culture made up of diverse audiences demanding greater inclusion and more dynamic

¹⁴³ *Oscars*, "'Moonlight' Wins Best Picture," 3 April 2017, video, 8:14, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCQn_FkFEII.

representations. In awarding Best Picture to *Moonlight* over *La La Land*, the Academy effectively endorsed the awards season discourses that pitched the two films against each other as representative of a broader political and social struggle. This context does not take anything away from *Moonlight* or degrade its cultural value, though. Rather, it tells us far more about the ways in which the Academy, and the industry that it purports to represent, adapted to shifting national and global film cultures during the 2010s and recognized that it must actively alter its identity in order to maintain industrial and cultural legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

In a glowing *Vanity Fair* profile of A24 released two days after the 2017 Oscars, Yohana Desta characterized *Moonlight*'s Best Picture win as a breakout moment for the company, writing that A24 had "truly arrived."¹⁴⁴ The award brought clear economic benefits to the company, with *Moonlight* bringing in an additional \$2.3 million at the box office in the week following the Oscars.¹⁴⁵ More importantly, as Desta argued, A24 was suddenly boosted in stature within the indie sector and the broader film industry for its ability to produce and distribute a movie of the caliber of *Moonlight* and also to usher it through a successful awards season campaign.

¹⁴⁴ Yohana Desta, "Is A24, the Indie Upstart with a Fresh Best-Picture Win, the Next Miramax?" *Vanity Fair* (Condé Nast 28 February 2017), <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/02/a24-best-picture-miramax>.

¹⁴⁵ "Weekend Domestic Chart for March 3, 2017," *The Numbers*, accessed 21 January 2021, <https://www.the-numbers.com/box-office-chart/weekend/2017/03/03>.

More broadly, the year 2016 was an enormously important one in terms of the industrial and cultural legitimization of A24. Starting off with the financially successful release of *The Witch*, continuing with three Oscars for *Amy*, *Room*, and *Ex Machina*, followed by the critical and box office success of the company's first in-house production with *Moonlight*, and culminating in early 2017 with the Best Picture prize, A24 was suddenly recognized by the trade and popular press as a definitive tastemaker and leader in Hollywood. Popular press outlets released a number of profiles of the company in the first half of 2017 that often compared A24's brand and success to Miramax in the 1990s. Such pieces utilized phrases like "saving cinema" to describe the company, and hailed the emergence of a youth-oriented, digitally savvy, and genuinely independent firm into the film industry.¹⁴⁶ The year-long stretch from February 2016 to February 2017 saw A24 demonstrate its ability to maintain and grow its audience through a stable house style, its ability to usher multiple critically acclaimed small-budget films to relatively large box office numbers, and to carry out a successful Academy Awards campaign.

By the spring of 2017, A24 had firmly established itself as the key tastemaker in the indie sector. The rest of the decade promised the company opportunities to grow its operations and capture a wider audience with its unique and recognizable brand identity. In the next chapter I focus on notions of individual and corporate authorship in order to interrogate the ways in which A24 deployed its brand in the final years of the 2010s.

¹⁴⁶ See Baron, "How A24 Is Disrupting Hollywood," <https://www.gq.com/story/a24-studio-oral-history>; Desta, "Is A24, the Indie Upstart with a Fresh Best-Picture Win, the Next Miramax?" <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/02/a24-best-picture-miramax>; and Jonah Weiner, "Get to Know A24, the Film Company Behind 'Spring Breakers' and 'Moonlight,'" *Wall Street Journal Magazine* (Dow Jones & Company, Inc. 18 January 2017), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-to-know-about-the-scrappy-film-company-behind-moonlight-1484754631>.

Chapter 3: “Their Logo Means Something”

A24’s Corporate Authorship

(April 2017 -- December 2019)

“They’re auteur-enablers.”

--Adele Romanski, producer of *Moonlight* and *Under the Silver Lake*¹⁴⁷

The end of the 2010s saw Conglomerate Hollywood impacted by four notable changes. Each of these developments were culminations of decade-long industrial trends and also serve to illustrate the importance of corporate identity within the global media industries. First, in late 2017 Twentieth Century Fox (then owned by the News Corporation conglomerate) began talks to sell off its film business and much of its television production holdings to the Walt Disney Company.¹⁴⁸ The sale, finalized on 20 March 2019, bolstered Disney’s content and intellectual property library and added another major studio to the conglomerate’s holdings, one primarily invested in live action films that, while still franchise oriented, were outside the Marvel (excluding the *X-Men* franchise), LucasFilm, and Disney intellectual property (IP) orbit. Along with Twentieth Century (the Fox name was dropped post-acquisition) Disney also acquired Searchlight

¹⁴⁷ Yohana Desta, “Is A24, the Indie Upstart with a Fresh Best-Picture Win, the Next Miramax?” *Vanity Fair* (Condé Nast 28 February 2017), <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/02/a24-best-picture-miramax>.

¹⁴⁸ David Faber, “21st Century Fox has been holding talks to sell most of the company to Disney: Sources,” *CNBC* (CNBC, LLC. 6 November 2017), <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/11/06/21st-century-fox-has-been-holding-talks-to-sell-most-of-company-to-disney-sources.html>.

Pictures, giving Disney access to the indie sector for the first-time since it sold Miramax in 2010. The second development involved the collapse of The Weinstein Company (TWC) as a result of the slew of sexual assault and workplace harassment accusations levied against Harvey Weinstein beginning in October 2017. Weinstein left the company he co-founded shortly after the allegations became public and on 26 February 2018 The Weinstein Company's bankruptcy was reported to be imminent.¹⁴⁹ While TWC had never reached the heights its founders had envisioned, remaining an independent mini-major unable to achieve the mini-conglomerate status of Lionsgate, Harvey Weinstein's name had remained synonymous with the indie sector since Miramax's breakout year in 1989.¹⁵⁰ Weinstein's fall signaled the end of an era in the indie sector and in Hollywood more broadly, not only the end of one executive's career or one company's operations, but also the further consolidation of an already shrinking pool of well-known indie brands.

The third change to occur at the end of the decade was Netflix joining the Motion Picture Association, becoming the first new addition to the industry trade group in over 20 years and symbolically cementing the importance of technology companies and

¹⁴⁹ Brooks Barnes, "Weinstein Co. Will File for Bankruptcy After deal Talks Collapse," *New York Times* (The New York Times Co. 26 February 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/26/business/weinstein-bankruptcy-deal.html>.

¹⁵⁰ These two articles provide a bit of insight into The Weinstein Company's financial struggles: David Segal, "Weinsteins Struggle to Regain Their Touch," *The New York Times* (The New York Times Company 15 August 2009), <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/16/business/media/16wein.html>; Michael Cieply, "The Weinstein Brothers Have Oscar Gold. Now They Need Cash," *The New York Times* (The New York Times Company 19 December 2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/20/business/media/the-weinstein-brothers-have-oscar-gold-now-they-need-some-cash.html>.

streaming services to the new landscape of Hollywood.¹⁵¹ Just days before the announcement, Netflix's *Roma* (2018) received ten Academy Awards nominations, tying for the year's most nods. Such nominations came despite the film's shortened theatrical release window. The MPA and the Academy's embrace of Netflix indicated another crucial way in which industry resistance to streaming services was diminishing. It also served as an acknowledgment of such platforms' important status within the broader global film ecosystem of production, distribution, and (online) exhibition. The final watershed--which was related to the previous one--involved the November 2019 launch of Disney+. This marked a wave of subscription streaming services to be launched by the major legacy media conglomerates. Disney+ was followed by NBCUniversal's Peacock, Warner Media's HBO Max, and ViacomCBS' Paramount+ over the next year. The launch of all of these services represented a new era in the media industries in which four out of the world's five largest media conglomerates (The Walt Disney Company, AT&T-Time Warner, Comcast, ViacomCBS, and Sony) were now directly invested in the streaming sector with centralized platforms for the exhibition of their libraries of film and television content along with a new launch site for original content.

While these four developments had effects throughout the industry, existing trends within Conglomerate Hollywood remained largely unaltered by decade's end. The majors continued to release franchise blockbusters which led the global box office to a

¹⁵¹ Ted Johnson, "Netflix Joins the Motion Picture Association of America," *Variety* (Variety Media, LLC. 22 January 2019), <https://variety.com/2019/biz/news/netflix-mpaa-1203114133/>.

record high of \$42.5 billion in 2019.¹⁵² With the notable addition of Neon in 2017, the indie sector remained tiered along the same lines discussed in Chapter 1, with the mini-conglomerate Lionsgate at the top and A24 climbing incrementally higher in market share every year. And the streaming scene continued disrupting traditional sites of exhibition. Disney's purchase of Twentieth Century, the indie sector losing one of its most recognizable companies, and the introduction of centralized conglomerate-owned streaming services all mark the culmination of a number of Conglomerate Hollywood trends throughout the 2010s.

Collectively, these developments compelled both consumers and commentators to reevaluate the corporate identities of each of the firms involved. Disney's unceasing growth since the early 2000s had come to define the conglomerate nearly as much as its historic association with animation and family friendly entertainment, and its acquisition of a large portion of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation underscored that fact. Meanwhile, it added new dimensions to Disney's brand and diminished Twentieth Century's. Also, The Weinstein Company's demise highlighted the complicated dynamics involved in corporate strategy and survival when branding is so intimately tied to a handful of individuals or less. And, finally, as the legacy media conglomerates introduced their individual streaming services in order to compete with Netflix, the catalogs of each platform actively construct the brand identity of their parent corporation.

¹⁵² Rebecca Rubin, "Global Box Office Hits New Record in 2019 With \$42.5 Billion," *Variety* (Variety Media, LLC. 10 January 2020), <https://variety.com/2020/film/box-office/box-office-us-misses-record-disney-dominates-1203453752/>.

A central aim of this project has been to track and articulate A24's own brand identity as it evolved throughout the 2010s. That brand, which was marked by an appeal to cinephiles and Millennial audiences through the cultivation of an aura of indie coolness via savvy marketing tactics, a unique social media presence, youth-oriented coming-of-age films, elevated genre fare, and a commitment to auteur filmmaking remained stable in the last years of the 2010s. Therefore, this chapter turns toward revealing how A24's brand identity functioned as a corporate author alongside the many ways individual authorship was constructed in indie film culture. By examining indie authorship as it relates to A24's films and its brand, I show how the company continued to capitalize on long-standing indie film discourses of auteurism and creative freedom in its marketing strategies. Simultaneously, I note the ways in which A24 deployed its brand identity at the end of the 2010s in order to shape audience and critical reception of its films.

As the epigraph to this chapter suggests, a defining facet of A24's corporate identity and public image involved the company's cultivation of auteurs—most of whom were white and male—and a commitment to creative freedom in filmmaking. In other words, A24's business model relied on producing and distributing provocative content that promoted auteur filmmakers, the filmmaking process, and film culture in general. In broad strokes, this was not unlike the image cultivated by Miramax in the 1990s. However, the Weinsteins loomed large over that company in a way that the A24 founders never did. Additionally, to repeat a key distinction made throughout this thesis both overtly and implicitly, Miramax's industrial positioning in the period after its acquisition

by Disney in 1993 situated it in a fundamentally different tier of the indie sector than the one A24 occupied during the 2010s. This is to say, A24's success throughout the decade offers us a unique opportunity to investigate the meaning of both individual and corporate authorship in the indie sector during the decade.

We might begin this discussion with Jerome Christensen's explication of the studio authorship thesis: "No interpretation without meaning, no meaning without intention, no intention without an author, *no author without a person, and no person with greater right to or capacity for authorship than a corporate person.*"¹⁵³ Christensen applies this thesis to the major studios still standing in the New Hollywood of the post-Classical era, but it is worth extending to smaller entertainment companies like A24 in the Conglomerate Hollywood era, in which branding and corporate identity play larger roles than ever in the consumption of media. Christensen argues that "the studio authorship thesis funds a theory of how persons make texts as well as how persons should interpret them."¹⁵⁴ Thus, by understanding the corporation as an entity endowed with the greatest legal capacity to author texts, we must see A24 as an important author among the plural nodes of authorship for each of its products; that is, the company exerted authority over its films alongside directors, writers, genres, paratexts, etc. Christensen argues that "insofar as corporations increasingly understand their objectives in terms of a marketing paradigm...the concept of the studio will remain vital to the success of corporate art,"¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Jerome Christensen, "Studio Authorship, Corporate Art," in *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 174.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

with corporate art being the cinematic works of art made possible by “the corporate organization of the studio.”¹⁵⁶

Within the Internet-driven neoliberal economy of the twenty-first century, it is clear that media corporations did in fact continue to understand marketing and branding as their primary tasks, as media content continued to proliferate in decreasingly standardized formats and converged onto digital sites of consumption. As the ephemerality of the digital took complete hold of the media industries, branding became an increasingly important site for the differentiation of one media corporation from another. Important to note, because A24 was not a film studio in the traditional sense (the company had no physical lot of its own on which it produced content in the 2010s), and because the company maintained key strategic and structural differences from the much larger conglomerate-owned majors by targeting niche audiences with indie fare as opposed to releasing blockbusters meant for mass audiences, I prefer the term corporate authorship to studio authorship when referring to A24. In order to understand how A24’s corporate authorship functioned in relation to its films, we must interrogate how the company constructed its brand identity *outside* of film, its primary product.

In order to capture the complex ways in which individual and corporate authorship functioned within the indie sector in the 2010s, I will discuss a variety of case studies. I compare how individual authorship was constructed by critical and press discourses with three A24 coming-of-age films: *Lady Bird* (2017), *Eighth Grade* (2018), and *The Souvenir* (2019). This discussion reveals how notions of autobiographical

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 167.

filmmaking can lead to the reduction of filmmakers' authorship to marketable notions of authenticity. By conducting a discourse analysis of critical reviews and popular articles, I illustrate how these notions of authenticity obscured writer-directors Greta Gerwig's and Bo Burnham's aesthetic choices and stylistic contributions to *Lady Bird* and *Eighth Grade*. Meanwhile, I discuss how *The Souvenir*'s thematic and stylistic connections to arthouse filmmaking led to critical discourses that highlighted writer-director Joanna Hogg's aesthetic style and filmmaking craft.

My analysis then turns toward two commercially and critically successful A24 elevated horror films from writer-director Ari Aster, *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019). I conduct genre and textual analyses of both films in order to underscore the ways in which generic tropes and intertextuality functioned as authorial contributors. I also discuss how A24 promoted Aster's auteur persona after the success of *Hereditary* in marketing strategies for *Midsommar* and its director's cut, released in theaters nearly two months after the theatrical cut. A24's investment in cultivating relationships with auteur filmmakers like Aster exemplified one of the ways that the company continued to appeal to young and cinephile audiences in the final years of the 2010s.

Finally, I look to some of the ways A24 attempted to brand itself at the end of the decade. Specifically, I conduct a paratextual analysis of the company's Public Access screening series during the summer of 2019. The Public Access events act as a case study representative of A24's branding exercises outside of film and television production and distribution. The live screening events provide the opportunity to investigate the company's use of social media, its attempts to create hype around the A24 brand, and

strategies it took to demonstrate to fans the company's sustained commitment to indie film culture. This chapter tracks indie film authorship at the individual and corporate levels in order to reveal consistencies and changes in the construction and deployment of filmic authority throughout the 2010s as indie film culture continued its spread to new digital platforms and communication outlets. Before beginning this analysis, I first briefly review the evolving relationship between the indie sector and streaming services in the final three years of the decade.

THE INDIE SECTOR, THE STREAMERS, AND CORPORATE PARATEXTS

In March 2018, rumors of a potential A24 acquisition by the tech giant Apple flew around Hollywood. By the end of the month, insiders at both companies felt it necessary to quash such speculation, assuring *Deadline* that talks between the companies simply pertained to potential production and distribution partnerships.¹⁵⁷ Just such a partnership deal was eventually announced some eight months later. Very few details were provided, other than that A24 was to produce a number of films for Apple TV+ over the course of several years. The deal was not a first-look partnership, meaning A24 was under no requirement to take films to Apple before deciding whether or not to handle distribution itself.¹⁵⁸ The documentaries *The Elephant Queen* (2019) and *Boys State*

¹⁵⁷ Mike Fleming Jr., "A24 to Apple Rumors Not True, Per Insiders; 'Moonlight' Distrib to Stay Indie," *Deadline* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 29 March 2018), <https://deadline.com/2018/03/a24-apple-acquisition-debunked-1202355795/>.

¹⁵⁸ Michael Nordine, "A24 and Apple Enter Agreement to Produce Multiple Films Over Several Years," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 15 November 2018), <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/11/a24-apple-deal-partnership-1202021047/>.

(2020) and Sofia Coppola's fictional *On the Rocks* (2020) were the first, and, at the time of writing, only, films to come from the A24-Apple pact. *The Elephant Queen* and *On the Rocks* first received theatrical distribution by A24 and were followed by an exclusive streaming premiere just weeks later on Apple TV+. *Boys State* was expected to use this same release strategy, but the COVID-19 pandemic precluded a theatrical release.

The production deal with Apple represents yet another tactic through which A24 offloaded some risk. By co-investing in production, A24 decreased its overall costs while partnering with a company hungry for content and with no shortage of cash. In this way, the A24-Apple pact was reminiscent of the independent distributor's co-acquisition deal with DirecTV signed in 2013. But DirecTV and Apple were markedly different types of companies and brands by the end of the 2010s; the former was a satellite delivery service with a fading subscriber base owned by AT&T and the latter was a stylish hardware and software technology company known for absorbing customers into its product ecosystem. Apple better represented the future of the media industries than did DirecTV both in terms of brand identity and corporate strategy, and thus A24's Millennial-oriented brand was boosted by its association with the tech company.

Apple's eagerness to secure content for its streaming service Apple TV+ points to the massive changes that streaming platforms brought to the media industries at large throughout the 2010s, but also how important streaming services became to the indie sector. Due to the tremendous success of streamers like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Hulu throughout the decade, numerous new platforms were launched. However, as noted above, a key turning point came when the Walt Disney Company announced in

2017 that it would end its streaming distribution deal with Netflix in order to deliver most of its content through its own direct-to-consumer (DTC) Disney+ service.¹⁵⁹ If all, or even most, of the legacy media organizations were going to pull their content from Netflix, Amazon, Apple, and others, these streamers would have to heavily invest in producing and acquiring original content as well as securing deals with companies unable or unwilling to launch their own services.

The proliferation of conglomerate-affiliated DTC platforms had three major effects on the indie sector. First, Netflix and Amazon became even more robust financiers of independent film content, sometimes offering substantial budgets to filmmakers. Netflix stepped in to finance and distribute Martin Scorsese's \$140 million-budgeted *The Irishman* (2019) after multiple studios dropped out due to ballooning costs. And while no filmmakers have secured as much capital from Netflix as Scorsese,¹⁶⁰ the creative freedom, strong marketing and awards campaign, and theatrical release of *The Irishman* demonstrated that Netflix could be a productive home for high-profile auteurs.

Second, alongside A24, Focus, Searchlight, Sony Pictures Classics, Neon, and every other indie distributor, Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, and Apple suddenly became competitors at festivals, film markets, and in the independent landscape more generally. Amazon alone spent \$41 million at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival on commercial

¹⁵⁹ Jacob Kastrenakes, "Disney to End Netflix Deal and Launch its Own Streaming Service," *The Verge* (Vox Media, Inc. 8 August 2017), https://web.archive.org/web/20180406102020if_/https://www.theverge.com/2017/8/8/16115254/disney-launching-streaming-service-ending-netflix-deal.

¹⁶⁰ Zack Sharf, "Martin Scorsese's 'The Irishman' Is Getting Way More Expensive: Budget Now Estimated Over \$140 Million," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC 12 February 2018), <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/02/martin-scorsese-the-irishman-budget-140-million-netflix-1201927596/>.

indies like *Late Night* and *Brittany Runs a Marathon*.¹⁶¹ Third, production, acquisition, and licensing partnership deals between independent companies and streaming giants formed with a new urgency. A24's deals with Amazon and Apple were examples, but Neon also made similar pacts with Hulu, licensing the majority of its releases to the streamer and also co-acquiring *Little Monsters* at Sundance in 2019.¹⁶² As I argued in Chapter 1, both Video-On-Demand (VOD) and streaming altered the locations in which indie film was encountered and, thus, the boundaries around what constituted indie film culture shifted over the course of the 2010s. This trend continued and grew throughout the decade, tightening the bonds between the indie and streaming sectors.

A24's concurrent reliance on and competition with the streaming giants was a dominant topic in the trades during the final years of the 2010s. This industrial relationship functioned, along with the company's film releases and marketing strategies, to define the independent's brand identity. The discourses surrounding A24 worked similarly to the ways that film paratexts shape audiences' perceptions of them. Jonathan Gray notes that "textual meaning, power, and value often begin with the paratexts, as they establish characters, plots, genre affiliation, themes, and identificatory possibilities sometimes long before we have encountered them in 'the text itself.'"¹⁶³ It is productive

¹⁶¹ Anne Thompson, "Amazon Rules Sundance, Spending \$41 Million as Traditional Distributors Lie Low," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 31 January 2019), <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/01/sundance-market-amazon-studios-netflix-hbo-platforms-1202039431/>.

¹⁶² Mike Fleming Jr., "NEON & Hulu Land Lupita Nyong'o Zombie Comedy 'Little Monsters' In Partnership Deal: Sundance," *Deadline* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 28 January 2019), <https://deadline.com/2019/01/little-monsters-lupita-nyong'o-neon-hulu-sundance-festival-deal-1202543692/>.

¹⁶³ Jonathan Gray, "When is the Author?" in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell 2013), 102.

to map Gray's notion of the authorial function of paratexts onto trade and popular press coverage of A24 because such coverage can either be the first place in which an audience member encounters the company's brand identity or else serve as a meaningful source of information for industry actors and observers. I use the term "corporate paratexts" to stand in for such authorial discourses surrounding A24's brand. Corporate profiles like the *Wall Street Journal Magazine*'s "Get to Know A24, the Film Company Behind 'Spring Breakers' and 'Moonlight'"¹⁶⁴ and the *New York Times*' "The Little Movie Studio That Could"¹⁶⁵ sought to introduce unfamiliar readers to A24 and also took part in the myth-building that surrounded the company. Simultaneously, when outlets like *IndieWire* and *Deadline* described A24 as "one of the most prestigious distributors of art-house cinema in the country"¹⁶⁶ and as "a tasteful and effective advocate for prestige films,"¹⁶⁷ they framed the company favorably for industry insiders and audiences alike. These introductions and framings—or corporate paratexts—provided by press coverage offered the same sort of "identificatory possibilities" that Gray asserts paratexts of films do. As such, they are worth tracking here in relation to both the company and select films.

¹⁶⁴ Jonah Weiner, "Get to Know A24, the Film Company Behind 'Spring Breakers' and 'Moonlight,'" *Wall Street Journal Magazine* (Dow Jones & Company, Inc. 18 January 2017), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-to-know-about-the-scrappy-film-company-behind-moonlight-1484754631>.

¹⁶⁵ Brooks Barnes, "The Little Movie Studio That Could," *New York Times* (The New York Times Company 3 March 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/03/business/media/a24-studio.html>.

¹⁶⁶ Nordine, "A24 and Apple Enter Agreement to Produce Multiple Films Over Several Years," <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/11/a24-apple-deal-partnership-1202021047/>.

¹⁶⁷ Fleming Jr., "A24 to Apple Rumors Not True, Per Insiders; 'Moonlight' Distrib to Stay Indie," <https://deadline.com/2018/03/a24-apple-acquisition-debunked-1202355795/>.

**CRITICAL RECEPTION AND FILMMAKER AUTHORSHIP: *LADY BIRD*, *EIGHTH GRADE*,
AND *THE SOUVENIR***

Corporate paratexts and critical discourses are important aspects to consider in approaching *Eighth Grade*, a coming-of-age film financed and released by A24 in July 2018. Comedian and first-time writer-director Bo Burnham's film depicts the final months of protagonist Kayla's eighth grade year. Kayla is a painfully self-conscious and anxiety-ridden young teenager who records clueless advice vlogs for YouTube and must navigate the perennially treacherous social milieu of middle school in the time of social media. The film acknowledges, but does not condemn, the realities of young people's complicated interactions with social media, offering a nuanced and empathetic view of adolescence in the SnapChat and Instagram age. Besides appealing to general teens and young adults with depictions of adolescence, the film—like *Ginger & Rosa* (2013), *Obvious Child* (2014), and *Lady Bird* (2017) before it—also targeted young women, specifically with its focus on a generally unremarkable girl. Kayla is completely average, not wise-beyond-her-years nor particularly bullied. Instead, she is ignored by the vast majority of her peers, dealing with the day-to-day realities of middle school and home life on her own. This makes Kayla a protagonist many young women and girls could relate to, an everygirl for young Millennials and Generation Z. Burnham specifically designed the character this way, asserting: “She doesn’t need to be quote-unquote ‘exceptional’ to be worthy of a movie.”¹⁶⁸ Precisely because of Kayla's un-remarkability,

¹⁶⁸ *Collider*, “Eighth Grade Interview with Bo Burnham and Elsie Fisher,” 15 August 2018, video, 13:12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vNqjGOElqI&t=772s>.



Lady Bird writer-director Greta Gerwig (right) on set with star Saoirse Ronan. This image appeared in a *Rolling Stone* article which foregrounded the filmmakers' personal connection to the film's protagonist over her formal craft. Credited to Merie Wallace/A24. [2017]. From *Rolling Stone*. <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-features/how-greta-gerwig-turned-the-personal-lady-bird-into-a-perfect-movie-126300/>.

she acts as a spiritual successor to *Lady Bird*'s title character, both being suburban everygirls stumbling into young adulthood.

Early critical reaction to both *Lady Bird* and *Eighth Grade* tended to focus on Gerwig's and Burnham's personal connection to their respective films. While *Lady Bird* was not explicitly autobiographical, according to Gerwig, the writer-director

acknowledged that her own teenage experiences did inspire the film.¹⁶⁹ The personal connection between Gerwig and *Lady Bird* was a key attribute highlighted in A24's awards campaign for the film. Ultimately Gerwig received a Best Director nomination at the 2018 Academy Awards ceremony. This connection was also seized upon by trade and popular press writers, creating an auteur construction of Gerwig that relied on the personal and spatio-temporal authenticity of *Lady Bird* in much the same way as reviewers and writers did a year before with Barry Jenkins and *Moonlight* (2016).

As I noted in Chapter 2, discourses of authenticity have been a defining characteristic of indie film culture since at least the 1960s when avant-garde filmmakers used terms like “personal” and “independent” to describe their work.¹⁷⁰ Gerwig's author function was constructed by press in largely personal terms, focusing on the director's identificatory connection to the film's subject matter rather than her formal or aesthetic command of the medium. For example, *The Village Voice*'s Lara Zarum noted that while “Gerwig herself doesn't appear, her giddy energy infuses both the film and character.” The journalist meanwhile ignored the filmmaker's choices in visual design or editing.¹⁷¹ A similar sentiment was captured in James Berardinelli's review of the film: “Gerwig's voice, known from past projects (mumblecore and other), is so strong that we can hear

¹⁶⁹ Kate Erbland, “Greta Gerwig Explains How Much of Her Charming Coming-of-Age Film ‘Lady Bird’ was Inspired by Her Own Youth,” *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 6 October 2017), <https://www.indiewire.com/2017/20/greta-gerwig-lady-bird-inspired-by-youth-1201884532/>.

¹⁷⁰ Janet Staiger, “Independent of what? Sorting out differences from Hollywood,” *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, ed. Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 13.

¹⁷¹ Lara Zarum, “Greta Gerwig's ‘Lady Bird’ Is a Divine Comedy about Growing Up Weird in the Class of ‘03,” *The Village Voice* (Village Voice, LLC 25 October 2017), <https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/10/25/greta-gerwigs-lady-bird-is-a-divine-comedy-about-growing-up-weird-in-the-class-of-03/>.

her speaking through [star Saoirse] Ronan.”¹⁷² These two reviews exemplify the consensus position among critics, that Gerwig’s personal connection to the film’s subject matter shone through in its writing and performances but that formal filmmaking techniques were not worth mentioning.

Similarly, Burnham’s authorship in relation to *Eighth Grade* existed within trade and popular press discourses as a function of his own personal connection to the film, with Kayla’s girlhood standing in as a perfect vehicle to explore the filmmaker’s struggles with anxiety. Burnham compared his own experience of being a young comic with a scene in which Kayla locks herself in a bathroom at a pool party and has a panic attack, saying: “That was me in the dressing room before going out onstage.”¹⁷³ Burnham’s relatively young age (27 at the time of the film’s release) also made for an authorial construction that circled around his ability to speak with authority about younger generations. This construction was boosted by the fact that Burnham began his career by making comedic videos on YouTube while he was still an adolescent. Thus overall, the writer-director’s author function was formed by press discourses as one of personal connection to *Eight Grade* rather than formal technique.

Importantly, and in contrast to the focus by journalists and critics, the *A24 Podcast*, launched in February 2018, offered both Gerwig and Burnham the opportunity to discuss how they approached their films from a formal standpoint. In the episode “All

¹⁷² James Berardinelli, “Lady Bird (United States, 2017),” *Reel Views* (9 November 2017), <https://www.reelviews.net/reelviews/lady-bird>.

¹⁷³ Bryn Sandberg, “Making of ‘Eighth Grade’: How Bo Burnham Brought His Anxiety to Screen in the Form of a 13-Year-Old Girl,” *The Hollywood Reporter* (The Hollywood Reporter, LLC. 20 November 2018), <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/making-eighth-grade-how-bo-burnham-brought-his-anxiety-screen-1162239>.

the Way Home with Barry Jenkins & Greta Gerwig,” the *Lady Bird* writer-director discusses how Sacramento inspired the film but also addresses her strategies for achieving a visual style meant to evoke her memories of growing up. At the prompting of Jenkins, Gerwig explains how the decision to shoot the film digitally on the Arri Alexa Mini was dictated by both budgetary restrictions and also because the camera could capture the “Xerox of a Xerox” look the director desired. This photocopy aesthetic also lent itself to many static shots, with Gerwig describing a desire for the film to look like a series of still-life paintings, medieval triptychs, and stained glass windows. The conversation goes on to reveal how Gerwig worked with *Lady Bird*’s actors, allowing her own experience as a performer to influence the way in which she approached directing the cast.¹⁷⁴ By discussing all of this, Gerwig fills in the formal aspects of her authorship in relation to *Lady Bird* that were largely left out by trade and popular press features and interviews.

Conversely, Burnham, in “High Anxiety with Jerrod Carmichael & Bo Burnham,” does not use the podcast as an opportunity to speak about his formal filmmaking process of *Eighth Grade*. Instead, the podcast episode largely circles around the two comedians’ thoughts on Internet culture, growing up, and Burnham’s struggles with anxiety.¹⁷⁵ For listeners of the podcast, Burnham’s authorship in relation to *Eighth Grade* continues to focus on his interpersonal connection with the film’s subject matter. The podcast

¹⁷⁴ “All the Way Home with Barry Jenkins & Greta Gerwig,” *A24 Podcast*, podcast audio, 28 February 2018, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/all-the-way-home-with-barry-jenkins-greta-gerwig/id1351044991?i=1000404162614>.

¹⁷⁵ “High Anxiety with Jerrod Carmichael & Bo Burnham,” *A24 Podcast*, podcast audio, 29 March 2018, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/high-anxiety-with-jerrod-carmichael-bo-burnham/id1351044991?i=1000407745080>.

examples underline how authorship is an ongoing construction dependent, in large part, on individual audience members' exposure to paratexts. Both Gerwig and Burnham directed their films—meaning that, without a doubt, both took part in the day-to-day decision-making over the aesthetic design and ultimate execution of their films. Likewise, each filmmaker had a hand in casting and directing their performers. But all this was largely ignored by reviewers of both films. However, a fan of A24 or of indie film who took the time to listen to the *A24 Podcast* would add Gerwig's discussion over her filmmaking decisions and techniques into their individual construction and understanding of her authorship. Burnham, on the other hand, did not offer information on his filmmaking craft in his *A24 Podcast* episode, and thus his authorship could largely be understood only in personal terms for audiences unfamiliar with *Eight Grade's* production.

Another A24 coming-of-age film with a young woman as the protagonist is *The Souvenir*. Written and directed by English filmmaker Joanna Hogg, *The Souvenir* follows Julie, a young aspiring filmmaker, as she navigates independence from her wealthy parents and a toxic relationship with her worldly and charismatic heroin-addicted boyfriend, Anthony, in early 1980s London. Like *Lady Bird* and *Eighth Grade*, the film is inspired by the life of its filmmaker, with Hogg developing the story by “looking back at diaries and thinking about the way [she] felt at the time.”¹⁷⁶ The sense of memory is reinforced by formal elements in the film as well. Hogg and cinematographer David

¹⁷⁶ Amanda N'Duka, “Director Joanna Hogg Gets Personal with Her Latest Film ‘The Souvenir’ -- Sundance Studio,” *Deadline* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 31 January 2019), <https://deadline.com/video/director-joanna-hogg-the-souvenir-sundance-interview/>.

Raedeker used a combination of Super 8 mm and 16 mm film stock and an Arri Alexa Mini with a 16 mm digital sensor to create subtle shifts in texture.¹⁷⁷ The most striking use of this technique occurs in the moments when Hogg films from Julie's point-of-view (POV) in a sudden shift from static 16 mm to hand-held, extremely grainy Super 8 stock. The effect of these brief POV shots is to transport the viewer into the mind of Julie and, by extension, Hogg. These moments invite the viewer to read the film as a reproduction of Hogg's specific memories. Simultaneously, because the change in film stock is noticeable to even the most casual film viewer, Hogg reminds us that by pointing a camera at a person, object, or landscape there is an immediate transformation into artifice. The medium itself—through writing, directing, and editing—inherently constructs narrative, in both fictional and non-fictional filmmaking. By highlighting the artificial quality of filmmaking, Hogg comments on the nature of authorship itself. Julie, as a stand-in for the director, is an aspiring filmmaker, studying at film school, and actively constructing herself as the kind of artist and woman she wants to be. Part of this construction is her willingness to deny the signs that her lover is lying to her, stealing money from her, and habitually using heroin. In these ways, *The Souvenir* is a *Bildungsroman* about the act of self-creation, the art of filmmaking, and the scars left behind from such processes.

At the level of reception, Joanna Hogg's status as an established arthouse auteur of *Unrelated* (2007), *Archipelago* (2010), and *Exhibition* (2013) led to the application of

¹⁷⁷ Justine Smith, "Cinematographer David Raedeker on *The Souvenir*," *Seventh Row* (Seventh Row & middot 24 July 2019), <https://seventh-row.com/2019/07/24/interview-david-raedeker-souvenir/>.

her author function by critics and reviewers in markedly different ways from Gerwig's and Burnham's. Even after making these three previous films, Hogg was not a well-known filmmaker to American audiences. However, many critics wrote of the writer-director as an established auteur who, with *The Souvenir*, was at the height of her craft. Monica Castillo asserted that Hogg's "architectural eye perfectly frames the [film's] tragedy in all its different stages."¹⁷⁸ Similarly, Ben Sachs noted the writer-director's "manipulation of what appears in the frame" and pointed out the director's "use of shallow focus to keep [the viewer] keyed in to specific details."¹⁷⁹ These assessments represent the detailed attention most reviewers gave to Hogg's filmmaking craft alongside acknowledgements of the autobiographical nature of *The Souvenir*. Critics' familiarity with Hogg's acclaimed first three features allowed for an easier recognition of stylistic and thematic patterns throughout her *oeuvre* than did Gerwig's or Burnham's. But there are a number of other important reasons Hogg's authorship of *The Souvenir* was discursively constructed by critics and journalists so differently than the two first-time filmmakers'. For the purposes of this chapter, the most important reason lies in how Hogg's film can be connected to canonized European art films such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* and Federico Fellini's *8 1/2* (both 1963). Like these two films, *The Souvenir* is, in part, about what it means to be a filmmaker and, consequently, how the artifice of filmmaking illuminates the performance and construction within the personal

¹⁷⁸ Monica Castillo, "The Souvenir," *RogerEbert* (Ebert Digital, LLC 17 May 2019), <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-souvenir-2019>.

¹⁷⁹ Ben Sachs, "Non-Fiction and *The Souvenir* Question How Well Their Characters Know One Another--and Themselves," *Chicago Reader* (Chicago Reader 24 May 2019), <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/non-fiction-olivier-assayas-the-souvenir-joanna-hogg/Content?oid=70449421>.

lives of those who practice it. Thus, Hogg's autobiographical coming-of-age film, especially to film critics and presumably cinephiles, was associated with more highbrow filmmaking than the more commercial *Lady Bird* and *Eighth Grade*, which wholly focus on their protagonists' relationships with peers and family members.

For a film like *The Souvenir*, which resides closer to the arthouse end of the indie spectrum, notions of auteurism are significant discourses engaged with by critics. But auteurism can also be an important marketing tactic, often deployed by distributors to capitalize on name recognition and fan loyalty. The problem for A24 with *The Souvenir* was Hogg's lack of notoriety with American audiences. Therefore, the distributor largely focused its marketing efforts on foregrounding the film's aesthetic style and beauty while highlighting its stellar reviews, displaying eight quotes from critics in the trailer. The first three critics' blurbs mention the film is a "memoir," a "love story," and a "mystery," thus framing the film in recognizable genres. The next three quotes featured in the trailer praise the lead actors, Honor Swinton Byrne and Tom Burke, along with Tilda Swinton's supporting performance. The trailer also features the Sundance Film Festival's laurel, acknowledging *The Souvenir*'s win for World Cinema Grand Jury Prize: Dramatic at the 2019 event.¹⁸⁰ Likewise, A24's main theatrical poster positions Richard Lawson's favorable review in *Vanity Fair* above the Sundance laurel.¹⁸¹ While both the trailer and the poster feature Joanna Hogg's name prominently, A24's marketing strategy aimed to

¹⁸⁰ A24, "The Souvenir | Official Trailer HD | A24," 19 February 2019, video, 2:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9Al2nC0vzY>.

¹⁸¹ "The Souvenir Theatrical Poster," *IMDb*, accessed 15 March 2021, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6920356/mediaviewer/rm3538316288/>.

capture art house viewers and perhaps persuade some middle brow indie audiences—both with strong reviews and Swinton’s name recognition—to take a chance on the film. Ultimately, *The Souvenir*, unlike *Lady Bird* and *Eighth Grade*, never got a wide release (peaking at just 145 theaters in its fourth week of US release) and thus the audience A24 attracted was much smaller.

Lady Bird, *Eighth Grade*, and *The Souvenir* together represent three A24 releases connected by their genre (the coming-of-age film), their focus on young women protagonists, and the autobiographical elements in each of their plots. Interrogating how each film’s authorship was constructed within critical reception helps to illuminate some of the complicated ways in which authority over filmic texts is understood. Because Greta Gerwig and Bo Burnham were first-time filmmakers of commercial features, critics focused on each’s autobiographical connection to their films. Conversely, reviewers were much more likely to highlight the film’s arthouse qualities along with Joanna Hogg’s technical command over *The Souvenir* because she was an established auteur along with the film’s art house qualities. To continue my discussion of authority among A24’s films, I turn to genre and intertextuality which are key factors that shape meaning-making.

GENRE, INTERTEXTUALITY, AND AUTHORSHIP: ARI ASTER’S *HEREDITARY* AND *MIDSOMMAR*

Hereditary, an elevated horror film from first-time feature writer-director Ari Aster, was only the third film A24 shepherded from in-house production through domestic *and* international distribution, following *Moonlight* and *Lady Bird*. However,

Hereditary represented the first time that the company sold international rights to individual distributors around the globe and also coordinated marketing and release strategies with these distributors.¹⁸² *Hereditary*, therefore, was a wholly unique release for A24, and proved—through the film’s global box office success—that the company could expand its operations beyond the domestic market and actively coordinate international releases of its films. Aster, whose short film, “The Strange Thing About the Johnsons,” gained some notoriety after its 2011 Slamdance premiere, had completed *Hereditary*’s screenplay by 2014, but was unable to find a studio to handle the film. Lars Knudsen, a producer of *The Witch*, came onboard the project as the result of a series of rights exchanges by multiple production companies. Knudsen’s previous work with A24, along with Toni Collette signing on to star, convinced the company to finance the film for \$10 million.¹⁸³

Hereditary is a deeply disturbing exploration of inherited trauma, grief, and guilt within the Graham family (mother Annie, father Steven, son Peter, and daughter Charlie), with mysterious occult elements strikingly similar to those in *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) and *Don’t Look Now* (1973). Like those earlier horror films, *Hereditary* relies on a familiar generic premise, that horror is located inside the bourgeois family unit, that the family itself is the Monster, in line with Robin Wood’s basic horror formula: “normality

¹⁸² Nancy Tartaglione, “‘Hereditary’ Becomes A24’s Highest-Grossing Pic Worldwide with \$78M,” *Deadline* (Penske Business Media, LLC 26 July 2018), <https://deadline.com/2018/07/hereditary-a24-highest-grossing-worldwide-movie-box-office-1202433883/>.

¹⁸³ Eric Kohn, “‘Hereditary’: The Year’s Scariest Movie Required Years to Make and Painful Experiences No One Will Discuss,” *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 8 June 2018), <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/06/hereditary-ari-aster-interview-inspiration-history-1201972348/>.

is threatened by the Monster.”¹⁸⁴ In Wood’s assessment of the American family as the source of terror and evil, it is key that the annihilation of the family—and the world, for that matter—is inevitable.¹⁸⁵ This holds true in *Hereditary*, in which the demon Paimon is being brought into the world through the children of the Graham family via the machinations of grandmother Ellen and her fellow Paimon worshipers. While the nuclear Graham family is not, at the film’s beginning, consciously working to destroy itself in the aim of bringing Paimon to Earth, the fact that Ellen has been working since Annie’s childhood to accomplish her goals locates the source of evil within the family. Ellen’s decades-long work to provide Paimon a human host—first through her own son, then through Charlie, and finally through Peter—stands in for the trauma that parents impart onto their children and which is successively passed down upon each generation. It is the inevitability of Ellen’s success in bringing Paimon into the world, the inevitability of familial trauma, that makes *Hereditary* so nightmarish.

The bourgeois family as the source and location of terror is, again, a familiar generic premise, and thus creates a number of expectations in the minds of audiences. In this way, we can understand the horror genre as a source of authorship of *Hereditary* because the film’s generic premise and tropes, revealed in marketing campaigns and in its plot, delimited the ways in which audiences could construct meaning from it. For audiences familiar with *Rosemary’s Baby*, the increasingly intense paranoia Annie exhibits throughout *Hereditary* evokes much of the disregarded and belittled female

¹⁸⁴ Robin Wood, “Return of the Repressed,” *Film Comment* 14, no. 4 (1978): 26, accessed 17 March 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43451389>.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 30-31.



Actor Milly Shapiro, who plays Charlie in *Hereditary*. A24 focused much of its marketing for the film on Charlie to misdirect audiences into expecting a film about a demonic child in the style of *The Exorcist* and *The Orphan*, a classic horror premise. A24. [2018]. From *Bustle*. <https://www.bustle.com/p/the-16-scariest-hereditary-moments-that-youll-never-ever-be-able-to-un-see-9419778>.

anxieties of Mia Farrow's Rosemary Woodhouse. This may have lead audiences to construct an intertextual reading of *Hereditary* that thematically links the film with the 1968 horror classic.

The roles of intertextual reading and generic anticipations were utilized by A24 in its marketing campaign for *Hereditary* to great effect. To Aster, it was important that the distributor preserved the secrecy of Charlie's shocking early death,¹⁸⁶ an event that catapults the Graham family into a tragic spiral of guilt, grief, and turmoil. A24 foregrounded Charlie in all of its marketing materials: centering the young actor Milly

¹⁸⁶ Gregory Wakeman, "How A24 Helped Make 'Hereditary' the Most Terrifying Film of 2018," *Metro* (14 June 2018), <https://www.metro.us/how-a24-helped-to-make-hereditary-the-most-terrifying-film-of-2018/>.

Shapiro's face on the film's theatrical poster,¹⁸⁷ framing Charlie as a sinister presence in *Hereditary's* first trailer,¹⁸⁸ releasing a second trailer that focused entirely on the character,¹⁸⁹ and creating an Etsy profile featuring the dolls she creates in the film.¹⁹⁰ By crafting the impression that Charlie is the central malevolent force in the film, A24 played off audiences' familiarity with films about evil, demonic, or possessed children like *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Omen* (1976), and *The Orphan* (2009). And by invoking such films, the distributor contributed to the shock value of Charlie's gruesome decapitation a third of the way through the film. As mentioned above, paratexts such as marketing materials are often the first places in which audiences begin their processes of meaning making, and thus A24's Charlie-centered campaign for *Hereditary*--and the distributor itself--must be counted as contributing authorial sources of the film.

Even before *Hereditary's* release and box office success, which represented the largest domestic opening weekend for an A24 release at the time (\$13 million) and the highest worldwide gross for any A24 film (\$80 million), the company had signed on to fully finance and distribute Ari Aster's follow up, *Midsommar*.¹⁹¹ That film, which follows Dani, her boyfriend Christian, and three of his friends on a summer trip to a

¹⁸⁷ "Hereditary Theatrical Poster," *IMDb*, accessed 17 March 2021, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7784604/mediaviewer/rm519258624/>.

¹⁸⁸ A24, "Hereditary | Official Trailer HD | A24," 30 January 2018, video, 2:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V6wWKNij_1M.

¹⁸⁹ A24, "Hereditary | Charlie | Official Trailer 2 HD | A24," 17 April 2018, video, 1:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJNR58zaStE>.

¹⁹⁰ Katie Erbland, "'Hereditary': A24's Horror Sensation Reveals Etsy Shop Featuring the Film's Creepy Breakout Star and Her Gross Wares," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 30 May 2018), <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/05/hereditary-a24-horror-etsy-shop-dolls-1201969588/>.

¹⁹¹ Mike Fleming, Jr., "A24 Pacts for 'Hereditary' Helmer Ari Aster's Next Horror Film," *Deadline* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 8 May 2018), <https://deadline.com/2018/05/ari-aster-hereditary-a24-commitment-next-horror-film-1202385437/>.

reclusive community in Sweden called the Hårga, utilizes the horror genre to explore trauma and grief similarly to *Hereditary*. But instead of the annihilation of a bourgeois nuclear family, *Midsommar* centers on the deteriorating relationship between Dani and Christian. To return to Wood's basic formula for the horror genre, Dani's mental health stands in as the normality that is being threatened by multiple Monsters, her own guilt and grief over the destruction of her family, the Hårga, and her manipulative boyfriend. For Dani, the threats from all of these Monsters are resolved when she decides to settle down with the commune, embracing a found family who shows her the empathy she's been seeking since the sudden death of her parents and sister. The film ends with Dani, newly crowned May Queen of the Hårga, choosing to have Christian burned alive as one of nine human sacrifices offered to rid the commune of evil. As the Hårga watch the sacrifices burning, Dani smiles and the film fades out, with the audience left to reckon with her choice to stay with the commune and rid herself of Christian.

While Dani is reminiscent of many gaslighted women protagonists of horror films like *Hereditary*'s Annie Graham and even *Rosemary's Baby*'s Rosemary Woodhouse, *Midsommar* primarily uses the tropes of the folk horror subgenre to create terror more explicitly than those of occult horror films. Communing with nature and the hope of peace that the secluded outdoors offers are fundamental to the folk horror subgenre, as are pagan rituals, secretive communities, and violent ends for naive outsiders.¹⁹² And while such films often depict the rural as an inherently more violent and inhospitable

¹⁹² Andrew Michael Hurley, "Devils and Debauchery: Why We Love to Be Scared by Folk Horror," *The Guardian* (Guardian News & Media 28 October 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/28/devils-and-debauchery-why-we-love-to-be-scared-by-folk-horror>.



The clearest inspiration for *Midsommar* is *The Wicker Man* (1973), a classic in the folk horror subgenre. From *Letterboxd*. <https://letterboxd.com/film/the-wicker-man/>.

habitat than the urban setting, *Midsommar* portrays both environments as horrifying to Dani and deadly to her male partner and friends. Importantly, Dani eventually moves beyond being terrified by the Hårga, instead finding sisterhood and healing among the community. That Dani, rather than a man, is the protagonist of *Midsommar* subverts traditional notions of an urban/rural dichotomy central to folk horror narratives in which the pagan and the ritualistic is gendered female and, thus, is inherently threatening to the urban male subject. In this way, *Midsommar* is similar to *The Witch*, a recent example of a folk horror film that ends with the liberation of a young woman from the confining and violent patriarchal world. But the clearest inspiration for *Midsommar*'s use and subversion of folk horror tropes is Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973), which also ends with the burning of a massive structure, complete with a human sacrifice inside--in this case, the film's male Christian police detective protagonist. Like *Hereditary*'s



The finales of both *The Wicker Man* (top) and *Midsommar* feature human sacrifice and burning structures in the ritualistic cleansing of secretive and pagan communities. British Lion Films. [1973].; and A24. [2019]. From *Medium*. <https://medium.com/@annieeknight123/mirrors-runes-and-bears-oh-my-a-feminist-reading-of-midsommar-12a5e73a4388>.

relationship to key occult horror films, *Midsommar* is authored in fundamental ways by the folk horror subgenre.

Despite the film not being nearly as successful at the box office as *Hereditary* (\$47.9 million worldwide) and its critical reception not reaching the level of enthusiastic acclaim, *Midsommar* solidified Aster's auteur persona, with the Rotten Tomatoes critics' consensus for the film asserting that it "further proves writer-director Ari Aster is a horror

auteur to be reckoned with.”¹⁹³ Considering the importance of the horror genre to A24’s brand identity and house style, the company had an incentive to fete Aster by promoting his auteur persona. One way A24 attempted to accomplish this was by releasing a 171-minute director’s cut of *Midsommar*, billed as Ari Aster’s Unrated Director’s Cut, in theaters nationwide nearly two months after the film’s initial run.¹⁹⁴ The director’s cut later became available to stream exclusively through Apple TV+, an opportunity for A24 to highlight its new relationship with the tech giant.

While A24 promoted Aster’s auteur profile with the director’s cut, the company also continued its appeal to cinephiles and those who identify as part of indie film culture with the release. As Geoff King points out regarding auteurism, “the distinctive mark that results from creative freedom becomes, in some cases, precisely the quality that has a value in the marketplace.”¹⁹⁵ Authorship, then, is a salable commodity worth cultivating by A24 in order to continue marketing to one of its target audiences: cinephiles. Michael Budd argues that the commodification of authorship has been a part of the art cinema sector since the 1950s,¹⁹⁶ but this notion can be extended to indie film culture in general where the fetishization of authenticity, creative freedom, and personal filmmaking has defined much of the discourse from critics and audiences since the indie boom in the late

¹⁹³ “Midsommar,” *Rotten Tomatoes* (Fandango), accessed 18 March 2021, <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/midsommar>.

¹⁹⁴ Kate Erbland, “‘Midsommar’ Director’s Cut: A24 Announces Surprise Unrated Theatrical Release,” *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC 27 August 2019), <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/08/midsommar-directors-cut-theatrical-release-1202169024/>.

¹⁹⁵ Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005), 159.

¹⁹⁶ Michael Budd, “Authorship as a Commodity: The Art Cinema and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*,” in *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 252.

1980s and 1990s. Alongside the commodification of Aster's authorship, A24's release of the director's cut appealed to horror fans, with the trailer stressing the extended version's unrated designation. The "unrated" categorization promises fans greater shock value with the implied promise of more extreme violence and scares. The director's cut trailer also promises "Extended Scenes" while footage of *Midsommar*'s only sex scene rolls, which—along with the promise of more gore—frames the re-release as an exploitation film.

The combination of elevated exploitation or genre films with independent auteurism in films like *The Witch* and *Green Room* (2016), as mentioned in Chapter 2, is fundamental to A24's house style. Therefore, we can understand the company's release of the *Midsommar* director's cut not as simply an attempt to increase box office numbers, but also as work to maintain its brand identity for key audience constituencies—namely, cinephiles, horror fans, and youth audiences. This strategy exemplifies how A24 often followed examples set by successful indie predecessors and contemporaries like Miramax, Focus, and Searchlight which likewise used auteurism as a branding strategy and marketable commodity.

Ari Aster is just one of a handful of young filmmaker-auteurs that A24 has created important relationships with. In fact, Robert Eggers, Trey Edward Shults, and the Safdie brothers all directed films that were released by A24 in 2019. Each of their films, *The Lighthouse*, *Waves*, and *Uncut Gems* respectively, represent the second or third time these filmmakers worked with the distributor. Importantly, Eggers, Shults, and the Safdies, like Aster, have made genre films released by A24 in the past, all of which

received positive reviews from critics, and which resulted in the company foregrounding the filmmakers' auteurism in marketing campaigns. It is important to note that Aster, Eggers, Shults, and the Safdies are all white men, an identity that has most often been associated with film auteurism, and a fact that has been the source of much criticism over the auteur theory and its application in film criticism and scholarship. Such critiques of writers who employ an auteurist lens in their film coverage argue that the embrace of the theory creates a homogeneous film canon that disproportionately privileges the work of white men filmmakers. Consequently, such canon formation practices contribute to the ongoing exclusion and marginalization of women filmmakers and filmmakers of color as Girish Shambu acknowledges in "Times Up for the Male Canon."¹⁹⁷

Indie cinema has historically been associated with socially and politically alternative narratives as well as with women filmmakers and filmmakers of color. This has created the possibilities for auteurism to frame the *oeuvres* of marginalized directors, and thus disrupt and diversify the traditional film canon. A24, as a leading indie tastemaker and a company that often deployed auteurism in marketing in the 2010s, was particularly well situated to advance the auteur personas of women and people of color. However, as the case studies above indicate, the company largely cultivated lasting relationships with white male filmmakers like Ari Aster during the decade. To its credit, the company did seem to be working to correct this practice in the early 2020s, releasing Sofia Coppola's *On the Rocks* (her second film distributed by the company) and agreeing

¹⁹⁷ Girish Shambu, "Times Up for the Male Canon," *Film Quarterly* (The Regents of the University of California 21 September 2018), <https://filmquarterly.org/2018/09/21/times-up-for-the-male-canon/>.

to finance and/or release second collaborations with Kelly Reichardt¹⁹⁸ and Claire Denis.¹⁹⁹ The company also released Lulu Wang's *The Farewell* in 2019 and financed and distributed Lee Isaac Chung's *Minari* and Janicza Bravo's *Zola* in 2021.

A24's attempts to diversify its stable of filmmaking talent remains an important task going forward, as racial and gender equity in the media industries continues to grow in importance to audiences seeking more diverse representations on film. By doing so, the company will continue refining its corporate identity and a house style built upon elevated genre films, offbeat comedies, and socially progressive dramas; the promotion of auteurism in an appeal to cinephiles; and a savvy branding strategy that marked it as a Millennial-oriented independent film company. In the next section I discuss some of the ways A24 deployed its Millennial brand and how that corporate identity functioned in the authorship of its films.

BRAND IDENTITY AND CORPORATE AUTHORSHIP: A24'S PUBLIC ACCESS SERIES

On 27 June 2019, A24's official Twitter account posted a mysterious tweet. The text simply read: "#a24PublicAccess is coming." Below this was a looping 11 second video of shifting white film screens, the aspect ratio changing every half second. With every aspect ratio shift, a new A24 film title would appear at the bottom of the screen,

¹⁹⁸ Jude Dry, "A24 Sets Kelly Reichardt and Michelle Williams Reunion, Plus Amy Adams TV Project," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC 26 January 2021), <https://www.indiewire.com/2021/01/a24-kelly-reichardt-michelle-williams-amy-adams-1234611918/>.

¹⁹⁹ Andreas Wiseman, "A24 Swoops On North American Rights To Claire Denis' Next Movie 'The Stars At Noon' With Robert Pattinson & Margaret Qualley To Star – EFM," *Deadline* (Penske Business Media, LLC 18 February 2020), <https://deadline.com/2020/02/robert-pattinson-movie-a24-swoops-us-rights-claire-denis-stars-at-noon-margaret-qualley-1202862098/>.

accompanied by a date, a time, and geographical coordinates in latitudinal and longitudinal form. The films included in the video were *Lady Bird*, *The Bling Ring* (2013), *The Witch*, *Good Time* (2017), *The Spectacular Now* (2013), and *Moonlight*.²⁰⁰ Nearly two weeks later, A24 officially announced its Public Access events, a month-long series of outdoor screenings of the films, projected onto billboards, in the locations in which they take place.²⁰¹ There was no charge for audiences, but capacity was limited at each location and seating was handled on a first-come, first-served basis. The first screening, for example, was of *Lady Bird* and took place on 20 July in a parking lot in Midtown Sacramento, California.

The Public Access series exemplifies one of the ways in which A24 operated outside of traditional film and television production and distribution practices and provides an opportunity to interrogate how the company's public profile in press discourses, on social media, and in the public imagination was constructed and consumed. This section covers some of the ways that A24 used branding strategies, its official social media accounts, and the Public Access series to deploy its corporate authorship outside the usual realms of film and television production and distribution. In doing so, I highlight how the company's corporate authorship complemented the discursive, generic, and intertextual authorial functions I discussed in the above sections.

²⁰⁰ A24, Twitter post, 27 June 2019, 8:00 am, <https://twitter.com/A24/status/1144228891000578052>.

²⁰¹ Kate Erbland, "A24 Announces Free Public Screening Series of Its Biggest Indie Hits," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 10 July 2019), <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/07/a24-free-public-screening-series-moonlight-lady-bird-1202156815/>.



The A24 Public Access screening of *Lady Bird* in a parking lot in Midtown Sacramento, California. A24. [2019]. From *A24 Public Access*. <https://publicaccess.a24films.com/>.

The Public Access series represented the first attempt by A24 to shape perceptions of its own canon. By choosing *Lady Bird*, *The Bling Ring*, *The Witch*, *Good Time*, *The Spectacular Now*, and *Moonlight* to screen in the series, the company strategically chose six films to represent its history and its house style. Significantly, three of the films are coming-of-age stories, two are critically acclaimed genre films, two are directed by women, and one by a Black man. The latter film, *Moonlight*, also represented the company's first—and, at the time of this event, only—Best Picture Oscar winner. *The Bling Ring* and *Good Time* are the two weakest box office performers of the six Public Access films, but their inclusion is likely based on their settings, Los Angeles

and New York City, respectively. A24's offices are located in both cities, which happen to represent the two most important film capitals in the United States, with Los Angeles particularly associated with Hollywood filmmaking and New York being an especially important hub of the American independent cinema. The cities are also likely the two most recognizable in the US, an important plus for A24 considering the company counted on images of the Public Access series flooding social media, particularly Instagram.

A24's Twitter tease of the Public Access events is reminiscent of sudden and semi-secretive merchandise and apparel drops that have become commonplace throughout the 2010s. These sorts of drops are synonymous with the Supreme clothing brand and so-called Hypebeast consumers. Fundamental to the Supreme corporate model is the ginning up of widespread enthusiasm for the release of new collections of apparel. The company, and others like it, purposefully keep stock of the new apparel low to create a sense of exclusivity. This product scarcity results in lines of customers that stretch for blocks outside of Supreme stores, with many of these shoppers arriving in the early hours of the morning in order to improve their chances of scoring new merchandise. This strategy of exclusivity leads to the sale of items, but more importantly, it leads to the cultivation of widespread brand awareness and the creation of hype around products. For customers who do not live in the geographic proximity of a Supreme store, the only way to interact with these merchandise drops is through social media. On platforms like Instagram, these dispersed fans can see images of the new merchandise, interact with other brand followers, and maybe even purchase the merchandise at marked-up rates.

A24's Public Access series attempted to work in similar ways. Because there were only six screenings in the country and no screening could accommodate more than a couple hundred viewers, the vast majority of fans of A24 and the films screened would only be able to catch glimpses of the events through social media posts by those present at the events. Additionally, by announcing the series such a short time before the screenings themselves, A24 tried to create a social media flurry over the Public Access events. Searches of the official #a24PublicAccess hashtag on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook reveal that such attempts to replicate mass enthusiasm were not, in fact, all that effective when it came to the screenings. On Instagram, the most visually oriented of the major social media platforms and thus the site in which one could expect the most substantial user engagement with the Public Access screenings, there are only 179 posts that include #a24PublicAccess.²⁰² Even if we allow for users who posted about the event without using the hashtag, this level of engagement is abysmally low.

Despite the low level of online activity over the Public Access screenings though, the series exemplifies an important facet of A24's strategies to brand itself outside of its film and television releases at the end of the 2010s. The company's attempts to create a sense of exclusivity and uniqueness around itself are also reflected in its online Shop, which stocks A24 branded apparel, merchandise, and stylish and/or quirky items related to individual A24 films or film culture in general.²⁰³ The Shop is often sold out of popular items like t-shirts, hoodies, and hats with the A24 logo on it. Additionally the

²⁰² "#a24publicaccess," *Instagram*, accessed 24 March 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/a24publicaccess/>.

²⁰³ "A24 Shop," *A24Films*, accessed 24 March 2021, <https://shop.a24films.com/>.



A screenshot of A24's online Shop, featuring sold out items including A24 branded apparel and a beach towel. Author's screenshot. [2021]. <https://shop.a24films.com/>.

Shop rolls out items connected with films that the company is in the midst of promoting and releasing, but such items eventually disappear from the Shop and move to an Archive page where fans can see but not purchase them. A24's official social media accounts post each time there are new items added to the Shop and often share Twitter and Instagram posts of happy fans with their new merchandise. The market for such items cannot be large enough to make the A24 Shop a substantially lucrative venture for the company. Instead, the Shop and its merchandise operate to create brand awareness and distinguish the company from other indie distributors and studios. As I argued in Chapter 2, A24 had a brand identity and recognizability within indie film culture in the 2010s that no other company had by the end of the decade, making it the leading tastemaker in the indie space. That indie fans would desire to wear the merchandise of any other company was an unlikely possibility and thus A24's Shop reinforced the company's identity as the leading indie brand.

The Public Access series' liveness exhibits another important foundation of A24's identity as a corporation. The screenings brought together scores of viewers in public



The A24 Public Access screening of *Good Time* on a billboard under the elevated MTA tracks at Dutch Kills Green in Queens, New York City. Hundreds of viewers congregated in the park to watch the film. A24. [2019]. From *A24 Public Access*. <https://publicaccess.a24films.com/>.

spaces, in some ways recreating the theatrical viewing experience, while simultaneously relocating movie-going outside the confines of movie theater auditoriums. The Public Access screenings rearticulated the company's commitment to film culture by facilitating the collective viewing experience, a ritual important to cinephiles. By holding the series' screenings outdoors and, in all cases except *The Witch*, in busy public spaces, A24 made an argument for the importance of cinema as a cultural form and reminded audiences and passersby that the theatrical experience is an inherently public one. With the Public Access screenings, the company attempted to illustrate the collective nature and

community-oriented possibilities of film culture, something A24 also attempted to facilitate through its aforementioned podcast, which allowed film fans to listen to uninterrupted and unplanned conversations between filmmakers; with its Notes blog, which provided a forum for filmmakers and commentators to write about various aspects of film culture;²⁰⁴ and with items in its Shop like the A24 Screenplay Books which offered fans coffee table-style collectors' editions of the scripts for *Hereditary*, *Moonlight*, *Ex Machina*, and *The Witch* along with exclusive essays and behind-the-scenes materials.²⁰⁵

With the Public Access series, A24 attempted to entice young audiences by following a Hypebeast model in its social media strategy, while demonstrating an investment in the participation and the facilitation of a vibrant film culture, and thus aligning its brand identity with cinephiles and indie enthusiasts. Despite disappointing online engagement with the series, the facets of the A24 brand enumerated above, along with auteurism, constructed a public persona that framed each of the company's films. In this way, A24 exerted a corporate authorship over its releases that worked to shape and define the discourses they were implicated within--discourses such as indie filmmaking, youth-oriented branding, cinephilia, and auteurism.

²⁰⁴ "Notes," *A24Films*, accessed 24 March 2021, <https://a24films.com/notes>.

²⁰⁵ "Hereditary Screenplay Book," *A24Films*, accessed 24 March 2021, <https://shop.a24films.com/collections/all-products/products/hereditary-book>.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have approached the question of indie film authorship from multiple perspectives to illustrate the complex web of authority that surrounded individual A24 films. The discussion of *Lady Bird*, *Eighth Grade*, and *The Souvenir* focused on how critical reception worked in the construction of authorship. While all three films were coming-of-age narratives with autobiographical elements, Greta Gerwig's and Bo Burnham's authorship was written about by critics and commentators much differently than Joanna Hogg's. Because of Hogg's existing auteur persona and *The Souvenir*'s proximity to the arthouse end of the indie film spectrum, critics discussed the director's formal and technical competencies more frequently than Gerwig's or Burnham's. Meanwhile, Ari Aster's *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* reveal the many ways that genre acted as an important node of authorship as well, with tropes and allusions leading audience members to intertextual readings of the films. A24's promotion of Aster's auteur persona in marketing campaigns, and particularly with the release of the *Midsommar* director's cut also illustrates how the company utilized authorship in the maintenance of its own brand identity. Finally, A24's Public Access series provides a clear demonstration of the ways the company displayed and cultivated its corporate identity outside of its film productions and releases. These sites of investigation reveal that A24 operationalized notions of authenticity and creative freedom long associated with indie filmmaking to market its releases. Simultaneously, the company channeled resources into branding strategies like its online Shop, Notes blog, podcast, and the Public Access screenings in order to signal an investment in film culture to its loyal

cohort of cinephile audience members. These branding strategies were entirely unique for an indie company in the 2010s.

In this chapter, I also discussed how interconnected the indie and streaming sectors became by the end of the 2010s through A24 and Apple's production partnership. As I argued in Chapter 1, the quick cultivation of A24's cool, youth-oriented brand identity made the independent distributor an attractive partner for Amazon Prime Video in late 2013. A24's continued efforts to refine its corporate identity over the course of the decade underscores the centrality of this strategy for the company. In other words, in an indie landscape that was continuously moving online, the marketing and branding strategies that A24 deployed throughout the 2010s helped it to stand out among indie companies as a corporate author of successful indie fare, attractive to streaming platforms in constant need of content.

Conclusion

The Safdie brothers' *Uncut Gems* (2019) was A24's final release of the 2010s. The film earned the highest per-theater average ever for an A24 film in its opening weekend (\$105,100),²⁰⁶ the highest single-day gross ever for a film from the company on its first day of wide release (\$5.9 million),²⁰⁷ and an all-time high total domestic gross of \$50 million.²⁰⁸ Admittedly, *Uncut Gems* represented the most expensive A24 film of the decade (\$19 million) and it also sported one of the biggest stars, Adam Sandler, to appear in a film released by the company. Rather than identifying the film as an outlier, however, *Uncut Gems* points to the tremendous growth of the company by the end of the 2010s, growth that was reflected in the box office performance of A24 in 2019. In fact, that year provided three of A24's top ten domestic grossing films to date (*Uncut Gems*, *Midsommar*, and *The Farewell*).²⁰⁹ This represents the culmination of nearly a decade's worth of executing a corporate strategy largely built on the cultivation of a youthful, cool, and auteur-driven brand identity.

²⁰⁶ Dino-Ray Ramos, "'Uncut Gems' Shines with Biggest A24 Per-Screen Opening, 'A Hidden Life' Debuts, Lionsgate Drops Limited 'Bombshell' Release--Specialty Box Office," *Deadline* (Penske Business Media LLC 15 December 2019), <https://deadline.com/2019/12/uncut-gems-shines-with-biggest-a24-per-screen-opening-a-hidden-life-debuts-lionsgate-drops-limited-bombshell-release-specialty-box-office-1202809673/>.

²⁰⁷ Pamela McClintock, "Box Office: 'Rise of Skywalker' Unwraps Huge \$32M Christmas, Crosses \$500M Globally," *The Hollywood Reporter* (The Hollywood Reporter 25 December 2019), <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/rise-skywalker-unwraps-huge-35m-christmas-little-women-opens-1264949>.

²⁰⁸ "Uncut Gems," *The Numbers*, accessed 24 March 2021, <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Uncut-Gems#tab=summary>.

²⁰⁹ "Box Office History for A24," *The Numbers* accessed 24 March 2021, <https://www.the-numbers.com/market/distributor/A24>.

In 2019, A24 captured 0.95% of the domestic box office, a company high,²¹⁰ but a markedly smaller number than leading indie companies secured in the 1990s and 2000s. Miramax, the indie outfit A24 has most often been compared to by journalists and commentators, for example, maintained at least a 4% share during the late 1990s, even rising to 6.66% in 1997.²¹¹ While Miramax was a conglomerate-owned subsidiary throughout this period, the difference in market share between it and A24 in its best year to date reveals the fundamentally different state of the indie sector in the 2010s. As I outlined in Chapter 1, 2008's financial collapse set back the indie sector by drying up funding sources just as the conglomerate-owned studios were closing or selling off their specialty divisions. A24's ability to emerge and thrive over the course of the 2010s as the leading genuinely independent company among a small group of well-financed conglomerate-owned competition was remarkable and entirely unique for the decade. Throughout this thesis, I have explained through industrial, discursive, and textual analysis just how A24 was able to find success. By quickly cultivating a unique brand identity that catered to young and cinephile audiences with distinctive marketing and branding techniques, as well as a commitment to auteur-driven filmmaking, the independent company grew to become the indie sector's leading tastemaker by the end of the 2010s.

²¹⁰ "Market Share for Each Distributor in 2019," *The Numbers*, accessed 25 March 2021, <https://www.the-numbers.com/market/2019/distributors>.

²¹¹ This information comes from *The Numbers*' yearly domestic box office summaries which can be found at <https://www.the-numbers.com/market>.

The budget, star power, and success of *Uncut Gems* in late 2019 indicated that A24 was primed to expand its operations into more costly film financing and, thus, more commercially-oriented filmmaking. However, the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020 precluded—or at least stalled—such a step. At the time of writing, the industrial and cultural effects of the global pandemic are not fully known. But the financial blow exhibitors across the United States and throughout the world have taken from over a year of unprecedentedly low box office numbers does not bode well for the future of theatrical exhibition. The indie sector may face another crisis similar to the one that ended the 2000s. This would likely result in the closure of a number of small, genuinely independent companies that have no conglomerate parent to absorb losses in revenue. For leading indie companies though, the future may not look as dim. Lionsgate, the sector leader, continued its growth as a mini-conglomerate throughout the 2010s, finishing fifth in the 2019 domestic box office among all companies, besting the majors Paramount Pictures and Twentieth Century. The conglomerate-owned specialty divisions Focus Features, Searchlight Pictures, and Sony Pictures Classics can rely on their massive corporate parents to shoulder 2019's losses. And A24, while a genuine independent, may also be well suited to survive the lackluster box office in 2020-21. The company remained lean throughout the 2010s, keeping employee numbers low and not overspending on financing and production. The company's licensing deal with larger Showtime, struck at the end of the decade, also provided a steady source of revenue.²¹²

²¹² Elaine Low, "Showtime, A24 Films Sign Exclusive Feature Output Deal," *Variety* (Variety Media, LLC 13 November 2019), <https://variety.com/2019/tv/news/showtime-a24-films-feature-output-deal->

Moving forward, A24's future corporate viability will also rest on its well-known brand identity, which the company leveraged strategically throughout 2020 to stay relevant to its loyal fans. In May 2020, as pandemic restrictions continued across the United States and much of the world, A24 organized a series of auctions of props and costumes from its films and television series that brought in over \$100,000 for New York-based charities.²¹³ These auctions created online and trade press buzz around the company at a time when theatrical distribution was nowhere in sight. The company's Twitter and Instagram profiles also remained active throughout 2020, posting and retweeting memes that responded to cultural events and promoted new merchandise available online in the A24 Shop. The company even responded to the summer of 2020's social justice movement in reaction to the continued murder of Black people by police. On 2 June 2020, A24's Instagram posted a note pledging \$500,000 to a number of charities and organizations "invested in ending police brutality and in the greater fight for the liberation, health and wellness of Black people nationally." In the same post the company also committed to more actively "amplifying Black voices and visions."²¹⁴

A24 also released six films during 2020 and early 2021, most of which premiered online or simultaneously in theaters and on-demand. *Minari* (2021) was a critical success and was nominated for six Academy Awards in 2021. Finally, A24 continued its production of television series throughout the pandemic. This thesis' limited scope

[1203403946/](https://www.indiewire.com/2020/05/midsommar-flower-dress-props-sell-a24-auction-1202232199/).

²¹³ Zack Sharf, "'Midsommar' Flower Dress and Props Sell for Over \$100,000 During A24 Auction," *IndieWire* (Penske Business Media, LLC. 19 May 2020), <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/05/midsommar-flower-dress-props-sell-a24-auction-1202232199/>.

²¹⁴ A24, "The first step," Instagram, 2 June 2020, accessed 4 May 2021.

restricted a substantive discussion of A24's television activity, which began in 2015 with the Amazon series *Comrade Detective*. The company's television operation has continued to grow since it began and by 2019 was producing popular and critically successful shows like Hulu's *Ramy* and HBO's *Euphoria* (both 2019-present). *Euphoria* is a particularly interesting site of investigation because of the ways it is thematically and stylistically reminiscent of key teen- and young adult-oriented A24 films like *Spring Breakers*, *The Bling Ring* (both 2013), *Lady Bird* (2017), and *Eighth Grade* (2018). This connection and more about A24's television operations deserve scholarly study in the future.

This thesis has taken A24's film operations—from the company's founding in 2012 to the end of 2019—as a case study to examine the broader indie sector throughout the 2010s. By tracking key moments in the independent's first eight years, I have outlined the state of the indie sector, with its multi-tiered structure encompassing the mini-conglomerate Lionsgate, commercially oriented mini-majors like STX Entertainment, conglomerate-owned indie divisions such as Focus Features and Searchlight Pictures, genuine independents with little brand recognition like Oscilloscope, and well-branded independent so-called “micro-studios” like A24 and Neon.

Additionally, this study examined the evolving interdependence between the indie and the streaming sectors. By the end of the decade, the streaming giants were direct competitors of indie companies in acquisitions and with key demographics, as well as partners in production and licensing. A24 was particularly well situated by the end of the 2010s to respond to a post-pandemic future in which the long-term viability of theatrical

exhibition for independent companies was in question. Since A24 executives had made it a priority to partner with streaming services and use Video-on-Demand as a distribution option from its early days, the company cultivated strong relationships with powerful streaming giants that laid a foundation for the uncertain future. Additionally, A24's singular brand identity, refined over the course of the 2010s, made its content desirable to audiences and, thus, an attractive library to license for streamers like Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, and Apple which were in constant need of content.

This study represents an early attempt to historicize A24 and indie film as a sector and a culture in the 2010s, sites thus far left largely uninterrogated by scholars despite the decade being one of important differences from earlier eras of American indie film. By the beginning of the 2020s, A24 was the leading tastemaker and one of the most identifiable brands within the indie sector among companies like Focus Features, Sony Pictures Classics, and Neon. A24's quick success makes it an important bellwether for the state of indie cinema in the United States moving forward, a brand worth keeping an eye on to identify industrial and cultural evolutions in American indie cinema.

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